«The Future of Humans in a Post-Human World»: *Frankissstein* by Jeanette Winterson

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Abstract

Frankissstein: A Love Story, Jeanette Winterson's 2019 novel, is a mirror transposition of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The novel adumbrates a posthuman or transhuman life to be lived «forever as brain emulation» thanks to artificial Intelligence. Scientist Victor Stein argues that we can develop our brain software through learning, including outsourcing to machines, until we learn to share the planet with «non-biological forms created by us». This delineates a world in which the cyborgification (the fusion of nature and culture/technology) is seen as inevitable and there is no need to 'defend' nature. With further lines of thought, my paper explores the metaphorical fields (parallel worlds, simulacra) and narrative devices (metalepsis, alternating montage, internal parallelism) that underpin this story. My point is that the attempted fusion of nature and technology, as theorised by techno-scientists in Winterson's story, only produces a modification in the attitude of some unaugmented humans towards other unaugmented humans, both living and dead. Finally, humans are not cyborgs, nor inforgs, nor full-blown transhumans but boundary creatures straddling alternative ontologies and often acting as less than humans, infrahumans or, like transsexual Ry Shelley, «inappropriate/d others».

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> We who were living are now dying
> With a little patience
>
> T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

Frankisssstein: A Love Story, published in 2019, is the latest novel by Jeanette Winterson, one of the most inventive British authors on the contemporary scene. In this paper, first I will focus on the text's characters, structure and narrative techniques in order to delineate their relationship with the posthuman or transhuman philosophies that are discussed in the novel. Then, I will discuss Winterson's response to the transhumanist agenda of Victor Stein, the scientist-protagonist of her novel, who understands life as a machine-readable form to be transferred into the cybernetic dimension. I will also make references to *12 Bytes*, Winterson's 2021 essay which investigates issues, such as Artificial Intelligence and Futurist thinking, which are fictionalized in *Frankissstein*. The novel depicts cyber-practices and the body not as intimately intertwined but as mutually exclusive. They are not, in the words of French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, the same «fabric», the same «flesh» (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 168). The question arises, then, whether the disembodied life envisioned by transhumanists is a simulacrum of life or rather a network of desires which are ultimately fulfilled by the mind. An issue that is for the in-dwelling resident of this world to ponder, whether in a speculative fashion (Winterson's attitude, which I gladly adopt) or in the form of the neo-anthropocentric scientism that is characteristic of most transhumanist thinking.

1. Text and paratext: mirror stories, mirror characters, characters without a double and printed characters

As the novel's title suggests, *Frankissstein* is a rewriting of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Or perhaps, rather than a rewriting, it is an updating or 'mirror transposition' of Shelley's 1818 gothic masterpiece, because Winterson's text alternates two parallel stories that reflect each other. The first story, set in the early nineteenth century, begins with young author Mary Shelley at the time when she is planning to write *Frankenstein*. The second, focused on transsexual doctor Ry Shelley and his lover Victor Stein, concerns events that reach the present day and deal with Stein's attempt at transferring human life into the cybernetic dimension. The contemporary events and existents of the modern story duplicate and, one might say, update the protagonists and circumstances of the romantic storyline. This is the tabulation of correspondences between the characters in the two stories:

Mirror characters

Romantic story	*Contemporary story*
Mary Shelley: author of *Frankenstein* and narrator of her story	Ry Shelley: doctor, transsexual and narrator of his story
Percy Shelley: poet and Mary's husband Victor Frankenstein: scientist who creates the 'monster'	Victor Stein: Ry's lover and Artificial Intelligence scientist
Lord Byron: poet, womanizer, and atheist	Ron Lord: entrepreneur in the field of sexual robotics and amateur poet
Claire Clairmont: Mary's half-sister and Byron's lover	Claire: clerk at the Memphis Fair, religious activist, Max More's assistant, Ron Lord's business partner
John Polidori: author of the gothic novel *The Vampyre* (1819)	Polly D.: journalist

The cast of characters is completed by minor figures who have no 'double' in the parallel story. In the contemporary narrative these include Max More, who is, both in the text and in real life, CEO of Alcor Life Extension Foun-

dation in Scottsdale, Arizona, philosopher, supporter of Extropianism, and the person mainly responsible for the definition of the transhuman in its current sense. The philosophy of Extropy – the opposite of entropy, i.e., rational order instead of chaos – is based on the faith in science, computational power, and nanotechnology. It promotes life extension and practical optimism. Its first two principles, heartily endorsed by Victor Stein, are:

> 1) Perpetual Progress: Extropy means seeking more intelligence, wisdom, and effectiveness, an open-ended lifespan, and the removal of political, cultural, biological, and psychological limits to continuing development. Perpetually overcoming constraints on our progress and possibilities as individuals, as organizations, and as a species. Growing in healthy directions without bound.
>
> 2) Self-Transformation: Extropy means affirming continual ethical, intellectual, and physical self-improvement, through critical and creative thinking, perpetual learning, personal responsibility, proactivity, and experimentation. Using technology — in the widest sense to seek physiological and neurological augmentation along with emotional and psychological refinement. (More 2003: last accessed 3 March 2022)

Max More is just one of the transhumanist philosophers, sci-visionaries and techno-gurus mentioned in the novel. Although they have no precise counterpart in the romantic story, their ideas are anticipated by both Percy Shelley and Victor Frankenstein, who, with different means, pursue «the human dream» (Winterson 2020: 82 *passim*) of defeating death. In this sense, the persistent repetition of similar episodes, as well as the return of human characters and types in the two stories, testifies to the enduring nature of this everlasting utopia, a dream that first appeared in literature with Gilgamesh and which has been reiterated ever since with unchanged pathos.

As for the romantic story, characters with no double include Mr Wakefield, director of Bedlam Asylum (historical figure); Captain Walton, explorer and scientist (from Shelley's *Frankenstein*); Charles Babbage, mathematician and inventor of the analytical machine (historical figure), and Ada Lovelace, Byron's daughter and 'inventor' of the calculating machine that has often been regarded as the first computer (historical figure).

While these characters have no modern counterpart, Victor Stein has two in the romantic story: the poet Percy Shelley and the scientist Victor Frankenstein. Like Percy, Stein is in love with a Shelley, the transsexual Ry, whose name, short for Ryan, obviously recalls Mary. Like both his counter-

parts, Stein is a «limit-surpassing» character (Bottiroli 2017: 13) who defies God's and nature's laws by envisioning a life beyond biological life. Not surprisingly, in the novel's ending, this prophet of transhumanism remains suspended between two dimensions. He disappears. His body is nowhere to be found. Perhaps he is dead or his mind has truly entered the cybernetic eternity. Perhaps, by pursuing natural transcendence in the wake of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, as is the case with many techno-heroes (Grantham 2005, 11), he has been annihilated by his own will to power. A similar fate befalls his romantic alter ego, Victor Frankenstein. With a typically postmodernist metalepsis, first Frankenstein meets his creator, Mary Shelley, in Bedlam, where he asks her to "unmake" him; then, he sees her again at a party in Babbage's house, only to disappear into thin air like a shadow as if an unknown force had really unmade him. We are thus left wondering whether the two Victors are the successful explorers of new life spaces or 'necronauts', as Tom McCarthy in his novel titled "C" calls questers ready to undergo near-death experiences (Baelo-Allué and Calvo-Pascual 2021: 15).

In both storylines, characters, whether historical or fictional, tend to behave in a similar way to their archetypes. Or, in Baudrillard's terms, they are a «precession of simulacra» in which both events and existents «are born at the intersection of models» (Baudrillard 2006: 16). Winterson's Byron, for instance, is a cynic and male chauvinist, with all the repugnance and dark romantic allure that entails. Ron Lord, his satirical version in the modern story, instead displays only the vulgar traits of this worn-out male stereotype: he is the perfect hero of a retrosexual masculinity narrative. But, in at least two cases, Winterson significantly alters the biography of her characters. In fact, Shelley's Walton, the explorer who collects the last thoughts of the dying Frankenstein at the North Pole and recounts his story in letters to his sister, terminates his treacherous pursuit without transgressing the limits set by reason. A 'sadder and wiser man' who has learnt his lesson, he takes Victor's advice and renounces his project of scientific exploration in order to seek «happiness in tranquility and avoid ambition» (Shelley 1985: 262). On the other hand, Winterson's Walton persists in his quest, discovers the Northwest Passage, reaches the Antarctic and returns to London as a hero. And he sends Frankenstein, who did not die at the North Pole, to Bedlam asylum.

Winterson also alters the biography of Mr Wakefield by making him the director of Bedlam asylum. The historical Edward Wakefield, Quaker, philanthropist and statistician, never actually filled that role. If anything, he was the protagonist of repeated and animated campaigns against the inhuman conditions of the mentally ill who were confined to Bedlam. These

activities contributed to the reform of the institute and to its relocation, in the summer of 1815, from Moorfields to St George's Fields, south of the Thames, in more dignified premises and less deplorable living conditions for its guests. As in Walton's case, these uchronic re-adjustments of events are a form of redress for the idealists who have been defeated by history or in stories. For Winterson, the efforts of present-day transhumanists are of uncertain effect, but idealists of past ages deserve posthumous, allohistoric gratification. The general spirit of the novel, however, is one of scientific curiosity and practical optimism. These are typical traits of transhumanism and extropianism, whose unflinching faith in a better future for the more-than-humans of tomorrow is tempered in Winterson by a deep sense of the human as embodied here and now, especially by Mary and Ry. Mary experiences miscarriage. She knows only too well what it means to lose the life she had nurtured within her body. Ry, more than anybody else, experiences the contradictions of a life lived across boundaries: «I am liminal, cusping, in between, emerging, undecided, transitional, experimental, a start-up (or is it an upstart?) in my own life» (Winterson 2020: 29). He is scorned, mocked, harassed, almost raped because the transsexual monster is a non-subject. He is part of the «inappropriate/d others» (Haraway 1992). His/her gender fluidity – he is a woman who is transforming into a man and is attracted by men – makes him/her aware of the pain and difficulties involved in the development of identity, whether sexual or ontological. For Winterson, however, techno-heroism (Donawerth 1997: 15) and transhumanism are male prerogatives. Mary and Ry Shelley are not affected. They live to tell the story of the men they love, and the pains of their own bodies, when their men's bodies are no more.

The gender binary is another form of duality which is explored in the text. Its prominence is evident from the publisher's outermost peritext, as Genette calls the area of the peritext that is primarily the responsibility of the publisher: the cover, the title page, and their appendages as well as the book's material construction (Genette 1997: 16). On the book cover, the tripartite title of the novel, *Fran kiss stein*, contains a play on words. *Fran*, which ambiguously abbreviates both Francis (a male name) and Frances or Francine (its female equivalents), *kiss(es) stein*. The allusion is to Ry's love for Victor Stein. But the idea of a 'third gender', a gender that goes beyond the male-female binary, is also suggested by the peritextual play on colours. The cover of the first edition of the novel, published by Jonathan Cape, was in three gendered colours: the background was dark blue (traditionally, the 'male colour'); the author's surname (Winterson) and the title were written in pink (the conventional mark of femininity); the author's name (Jeanette)

and the three x's penned above the title were orange. In genetics the three x's identify a female individual with supernumerary chromosomes, the so-called 'superfemale', or, in more scientific terms, a subject suffering from trisomy or triple x syndrome, which affects, with no visible effects, one female in a thousand. In fact, the implicit message of the cover is that the hero/ine (and perhaps the author) of the novel is neither blue nor pink, neither male nor female. He/she wishes to be orange, a superfemale whose gender identity transcends binaries and is defined by culture and desire rather than genetics. It should also be noted that Winterson's debut novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, used the word 'orange' to contend that gender is not an irrevocable fact, but a vocation. Nearly twenty-five years later, *Frankissstein* re-evaluates orange, by transforming it from the colour of homologation into the emblem of multiple possibilities. Orange is the new black in the sphere of sex, just like «brain emulation will be the new normal» (Winterson 2020: 280) in Victor's brave new world of science. This emancipation from biology responds to the admonition contained in the *Transhumanist Handbook* edited by educator, futurist, and chairman of the California Transhumanist Party, Newton Lee: «The longer we stay in the purgatory of humanity as we know today, the more human suffering we have to endure» (Lee 2019: 8). This delineates a utopian dimension in which the relationship between self, other, and power is reworked so that, in Donna Haraway's words, there is «agency …without defended subjects» (Haraway 1991: 3). Democracy (or transhuman paradise) «to come», as Jacques Derrida often repeated (Derrida 2005).

2. All that is double tends towards oneness: the duality of voices and of structure

The main narrative device in the novel is the alternating montage of two parallel stories told by two first-person narrators. This is far from infrequent in postmodern novels. Among texts with a 'dual structure' one may count *Possession* (1990) by A.S. Byatt, *Hawksmoor* (1985) and *English Music* (1992) by Peter Ackroyd. But while these novels are divided into chapters that are conventionally marked by numbers or titles, in *Frankissstein* two different stories alternate with less clear paratextual demarcation. These usually short sequences are arranged in a continuous narrative flow, which is interrupted only by blank spaces and epigraphs: maxims, long quotations and even dictionary definitions. This sense of continuity is reinforced by the use of epanadiplosis, the figure of speech that consists in the repetition at the beginning of a sentence of a word or phrase that has

been used at the end of the previous sentence. For example, at the end of the Lake Geneva episode, in the opening scene of the novel, Mary Shelley announces her resolution to write *Frankenstein* in the following terms: «On the morrow I announced that I had *thought of a story*» (Winterson 2020: 23).

Then, the epigraph to the next sequence opens with the repetition of 'story', thus producing the epanadiplosis:

> *Story*: a series of connected events, real or imagined. Imagined or real.
> Imagined
> And
> Real. (*Ibid.*)

The vertical arrangement of words in this epigraph iconises the paradigmatic and metaphorical dimension of language, which Jakobson called the vertical axis of language (Jakobson 1964). The syntagmatic and metonymical dimension (Jakobson's horizontal axis) is instead the mutually exclusive sphere of «Imagined or real» events, where actions usually come across as horizontally connected or disconnected. Winterson's novel envisions a new kind of romantic/transhuman hyper-connection, which is based on the 'vertical' identification of multiple timelines and spaces. Numerous epigraphs insist in fact on the identification between fiction and ever unstable reality. Just as frequent are the epigraphs which emphasize the overlapping of old and updated ontologies. «*Reality is water soluble*» (Winterson 2020: 1). Reality bends with the heat or blurs in the mist. The mind is, as argued in an epigraph quoting a Max Planck dictum, «the matrix of all matter» (Winterson 2020: 69).

Formal duality, which in Winterson aspires to dissolve in a unified flux[1], is instrumental to outlining the universe as imagined in *Frankissstein*. The reduction to oneness is clearly thematized in the final part of the novel, which illustrates the Gnostic idea of pleroma with reference to the codices of Nag Hammadi. The cosmology outlined in those texts, discovered

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[1] This applies to a great part of Winterson's literary production. She has spoken of her novels from *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) to *The Power Book* (2016) as of a single uninterrupted cycle. Some critics prefer to describe this continuity as a persistent variation on the same thing (see discussion in Onega 2006: 203-204). Especially in *The Stone Gods* (2007) Winterson understands futurity as repetition, mere iteration that is just as lethal as the past (Rine 2011: 74). At the same time, «Rather than rejecting science, in Haraway's terms she 'refus[es] an anti-science metaphysics'» (Watkins 2020: 76).

in Egypt in 1945, is hybridized by Winterson with gender discourse and cybernetics. The pleroma, traditionally conceived by the Gnostics as the cosmic zone of fullness between the ideal absolute and the material sphere, is re-imagined by Winterson as an indistinct unity of male and female, and in analogy to the alternation of 0 and 1 in computer code: «Think of them as the zeros and ones of code» (Winterson 2020: 294). In *12 Bytes*, more an incunable than an appendix to *Frankissstein*, Winterson further clarifies that, just like the universe, «Our new intelligence – embodied or non-embodied – is built out of zeros and ones of code» (Winterson 2021: pos. 18). Clearly Winterson's main concern is not simply about textual cohesion, as prescribed by Forster's famous slogan 'only connect', or about the illustration of vague analogies between the cosmos and the mind. This hyper-connection alludes to the technological revolution that has brought the citizen of the Novacene, the coming era of hyper-intelligence according to scientist and philosopher James Lovelock (Winterson 2021: pos. 56), to the threshold of the so-called internet of things. Hyper-connection concerns the total integration of the human being in the surrounding environment. As Winterson explains, in ambient computing, or the internet of things, our mind does not converse with the environment. It *is* the environment. Things around us, devices and appliances of all sorts, operate like computers integrated into our minds and fulfill or even anticipate our needs and desires (Winterson 2021: pos. 51,9). We co-belong, just like the devices that are with us, to one *Umwelt*, a world of life that is no more artificial than primal. The human mind is already physically expanding beyond the province of the skull. As Margaret Atwood never tires of repeating, speculative fiction is «about things that could happen» (Atwood 2011: 6), possible worlds that are already, at least in part, real ones.

3. The transhuman explained to humans: a Royal Society lecture and an underground experiment

Victor Frankenstein's dream was to create life from death by reanimating inanimate matter through the process of galvanisation. Victor Stein's dream is to translate the electro-chemical impulses of the human brain into bytes, artificial intelligence, and thereby enable man to survive as a cognitive subject, while the corporeal shell decays and dies. Within a cybernetic platform, dematerialised, freed from the perishable carcass of the body, the man-brain will thus be able to eternalise itself as consciousness, thought and memory. In his out-of-body omnipotence, he will even be able to colo-

nise the cosmos. The hubris of both Stein and Frankenstein is thus the same as that of Prometheus plasticator, who in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* creates man from clay, and of Prometheus pyrophoros, who in the myth steals fire, the symbol of knowledge, from the gods, to give it to man. But Stein's hubris is also that of the modern dictator as described by Martin Heidegger, the overman that can direct the technological processes because he alone is capable of being completely ruled by the essence of technology: «The alleged 'dictatorships' are not a *dictans*…, but the *dictatum* of that essence of being from which modern humans cannot withdraw» (Heidegger 2017: 336).

Besides myth, both Shelley and Winterson draw on science. If the «new Prometheus» alluded to in the subtitle of Shelley's novel is, among other sources, indebted to *Galvanism and Machine Man* (1747) by French philosopher Julien Jean Offroy de La Mettrie, Victor Stein's transhuman philosophy is the distillation of Winterson's copious readings on AI, which she discusses in *12 Bytes*. Among them, the essay *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (2005) stands out. Its author, Ray Kurzweil, essayist, inventor, and director of engineering at Google, makes a fleeting appearance in the novel, at the Memphis Tec-X-Po fair, where he has an animated discussion about singularity with Elon Musk. Technological singularity, or simply 'singularity', a concept introduced by mathematician John Von Neumann in the 1950s, refers to the moment in the future when technological development will be uncontrollable and irreversible. According to the theory of the intelligence explosion, at the culmination of a series of uncontrollable cognitive upgrades, an intelligent agent, what we now commonly call a machine and Marx called 'an animated monster', will rise to the rank of superintelligence: a cognitive level far beyond that of human intelligence. Another mathematician, better known as a science fiction author, Vernor Vinge, in a much-discussed article titled "The Coming Technological Singularity: How to Survive in the Post-Human Era", predicted in 1993 that this transition would occur between 2005 and 2030. Futurist and environmental scientist James Lovelock, on the other hand, speaks of hyper-intelligence and points out that «Artificial Intelligence will not be a tool for long; it will be a life-form. But, before that happens, all of us humans will be living in computer-world» (quoted in Winterson 2021: pos. 56). However, this idea, central in Winterson's novel, is certainly not only Lovelock's prerogative; he is just the most eloquent of its supporters. Extropianist Max More, who unlike Lovelock is a character in the novel, also shares it. More claims it will soon be possible to upload one's memory and psychological data, currently stored in the brain, to a technological medium such as a hard disk, a chip or a database. Consequently, Extro-

pianism advocates the merging of multiple identities into a single 'collective consciousness', bringing together all available information, making transhumans immortal and omniscient. *Homo Deus*, *homo sive computer*, one could say evoking Yuval Harari and Baruch Spinoza. This obviously turns Percy Shelley's romantic dreams about the immortality of the soul, which he expounded in many of his verses and in the essay "On a Future State", into a technological nightmare: «I believe it is each man's task to awaken his own soul. His soul is that part of him not subject to death and decay; that part of him made alive to truth and beauty» (Winterson 2020: 56).

Alan Turing, Jack Good and Marvin Minsky are other mathematicians whose reflections on Artificial Intelligence are echoed in *Frankissstein*. Interestingly enough, in their life both Turing and Good experienced discrimination and in *Frankissstein* Winterson recalls their existential suffering along with their professional achievements. She shows herself aware of the inextricability of intellectual life from social and emotional life. In 1952 Turing, a homosexual, was sentenced to jail for 'gross indecency' and forced to accept chemical castration to avoid imprisonment. This was despite the fact that, by breaking the Enigma code, he had probably proved the single most important factor in determining the defeat of Nazi Germany during World War II. Winterson also recalls Turing's famous test, illustrated in the 1950 article "Computing machinery and intelligence", which appeared in the magazine *Mind*. Turing's argument was that a machine could trick a human being into believing that it was itself human: the so-called imitation game. This was a relevant first step towards the homologation of man and machine.

Jack Good, who was brought up in London and studied at Cambridge University, was harassed and marginalized by the English due to his Jewish-Polish origins. In his studies, he had shown that unsupervised artificial neural networks (mini-brains) were capable of self-learning and self-duplication, independently of human intervention (Winterson 2021: pos. 139). He had also pondered, first in academic publications and then as a consultant on the screenplay for Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, whether super-intelligent machines could declare their independence from humans, as the supercomputer Hal does in the film. In *Frankissstein*, Victor Stein is Good's disciple and, in a way that recalls Mel Brooks' and Gene Wilder's parody film *Frankenstein Jr*, he plans to use his mentor's brain for the first experiment in the transition of human to artificial intelligence. His intentions are *Good*. This programme is shared by AI biologist Aubrey De Grey, whose credo is discussed in *12 Bytes*. De Grey argues that it is even possible for humans to live for a thousand years thanks to organ maintenance and rejuvenation techniques (Winterson 2021: pos. 11.3). Failing this,

there is always the possibility of uploading the brain onto another platform, which in the early stages is not made of meat. This is exactly Victor Stein's transhumanist agenda.

These theories are in fact the heart of the lecture Stein gives at the Royal Society, a sort of transhumanist manifesto. Victor defines his thinking as anti-binary. Binarism, proclaims the charismatic speaker, belongs to our «carbon-based past. The future is not biology – it's AI» (Winterson 2020: 72). According to Stein, there are three types of life: the first type is based on millennial evolution; the second, partially self-designed, is based on brain development through the exercise of cognitive practice and outsourcing to machines. The third, the one that really fascinates him, is fully self-designing:

> *Type 3 Life*: *Fully self-designing*.
> Now he gets excited. The nearby world of AI will be a world where the physical limits of our bodies will be irrelevant. Robots will manage much of what humans manage today. Intelligence – perhaps even consciousness – will no longer be dependent on a body. We will learn to share the planet with non-biological life forms created by us. We will colonise space. (Winterson 2020: 73)

The emphatic crescendo of his speech clearly denounces Stein's exaltation. At first, he sounds like an inflamed scientist. In the end, the atavistic will to power emerges: for him, transhumanism is just another name for neo-colonialism. Then, Stein proceeds to illustrate visually his posthuman agenda. On the screen behind him, Leonardo's Vitruvian man, the very symbol of Western humanism, appears. With a remarkable dramatic effect, the image animates itself, the man enters the sea and disappears into the waves:

> Behind him on the screen tonight is Leonardo's drawing of *The Vitruvian Man*. As the audience sit in silence, Leonardo's image animates itself, takes an appearing trilby from an appearing peg and, placing it on the back of its head, turns and walks into an appearing sea. The sound of the waves can be heard clearly. The image of the man walks without pausing until the waters reach his head. All that is left behind is the hat floating calmly on the indifferent sea. (*Ibid.*: 73-74)

This brings to mind the concluding paragraph of Michel Foucault's essay *The Order of Things*, another well-known dirge to anthropocentrism. Here, too, man, defined as a recent invention, seems destined to disappear like a face drawn on the sand by the shoreline. Winterson adds a touch of

irony to Foucault's sombre picture of the end of humanism by hinting at a mysterious hat, certainly not a part of the Vitruvian man's clothing. This probably echoes the ending of Conrad's novella titled "The Secret Sharer", where Leggatt, the eponymous hero, also disappears into the sea leaving behind a floating hat. However, this is irony with a meaning. The hat is part of the typical attire of the bourgeois man, and, with this reference, Winterson probably alludes to the mix of ideal and practical that characterizes the prototypical European bourgeois as described, among others, by Machiavelli, Aby Warburg and Franco Moretti (2013: 5):

> And [man's] appearance was not the liberation of an old anxiety, the transition into luminous consciousness of an age-old concern, the entry into objectivity of something that had long remained trapped within beliefs and philosophies: it was the effect of a change in the fundamental arrangements of knowledge. As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end.
>
> If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility – without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises – were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea. (Foucault 2002: 422)

Victor smiles, walks forward, turning back to his screen. Then he resumes his speech:

> […] I called this lecture *The Future of Humans in a Post-Human World* because artificial intelligence is not sentimental – it is biased towards best possible outcomes. The human race is not a best possible outcome. (Winterson 2020: 74)

In Victor's view, in fact, the future of mankind is through self-destruction (the posthuman agenda) and self-enhancement (the transhuman redemption of a being who does not resign himself to living like plants and bacteria). What Victor wants to do away with is not only religion, race and gender prejudices, but biology. The life of the mind will dispense with biological limitations as well as with man's default defects.

Victor is brilliant. He is in control. His replies to the questions from the public are erudite and witty. Then, a woman challenges him with the

fatal question: «WHAT IS SO SMART ABOUT THE END OF THE HU-MAN?» (Winterson 2020: 76). Victor, hardly disturbed, explains that science no longer considers homo sapiens to be a special case. Even human beings, like plants or frogs, can be regarded as input data. All the more so because man has not performed well. He has caused climate change, mass extinction of flora and fauna, destruction of habitat etc. His end is not to be mourned, but celebrated.

Then, paraphrasing the theory of singularity, Victor prophesies that the first superintelligence can only be the product of human imperfection. This imperfect first perfection will be inevitably marred by phallogocentrism. But it will self-emend:

> *Even if, even if* the first superintelligence is the worst possible iteration of what you might call the white male autistic default programme, the first upgrade by the intelligence itself will begin to correct such errors. And why? Because we humans will only programme the future once. After that, the intelligence we create will manage itself.
> And us.
> *Thank you*.
> […]
> The future is a plausible app. (Winterson 2020: 80)

Winterson's irony resonates in Ry's final remark about a future of immaculate perfection made available by an app. The eternal human dream of attaining immortality is no less pathetic when expressed in Percy Shelley's inflamed verses than in Victor Stein's scientific parlance.

The last occasion when Victor expounds his ideas is in his underground laboratory in Manchester, the place where in wartime Alan Turing's team conducted their research on the enigma code. Victor discusses Gnosis, pits Sophia the Gnostic deity against Jehovah, and freely concedes that the gods we have invented have failed. In the grip of new-age exaltation, he lists the Gods who had a mortal parent and an immortal one: Jesus, Dionysus, Hercules, Gilgamesh, Wonder Woman. He calls them the outcome of enhanced biology. This means that, for as long as they are imprisoned in a body, they, too, are cursed.

It is no coincidence that Manchester is the setting of the novel's catastrophe. Manchester is the place where everything began. It is where, according to Tocqueville, at the time of the Industrial Revolution individual power celebrated its triumph over society. It is where Marx and Engels saw the looms enslave the workers at the dawn of the man-machine conflict. As Winterson

puts it in her essay titled *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal*,

> Manchester was all mix. It was radical — Marx and Engels were here. It was repressive — the Peterloo Massacres and the Corn Laws. Manchester spun riches beyond anybody's wildest dreams, and wove despair and degradation into the human fabric. It was Utilitarian, in that everything was put to the test of 'Does this work?'. It was Utopian — its Quakerism, its feminism, its anti-slavery movement, its socialism, its communism. (Winterson 2011: pos. 27)

And it was in Manchester laboratories that Turing gave a decisive impulse to building the ancestor of the computer. Manchester, Winterson's hometown, is a place of possibilities and contradictions. Here, Victor gathers Ry, Ron and Claire, who are joined by the uninvited journalist Polly D. They are the guests of his transhuman ark and the witnesses to his passage to augmented reality. He attempts his experiment, but eventually disappears in the deafening noise of machinery, never to be seen again. The other characters, excluded from the ark, remain terrified with their feet in the water let out by the security system. For a few days, Ry looks for Victor in vain. «[P]resent and invisible» (Winterson 2020: 340), Ry is the struggling reminder of the materiality of the body-self who eats, breathes, suffers. Polly D. invites him out to dinner. He accepts. Eating in settings conducive to socialization is the answer: the body is the medium and the mediator of experience, the initiator of responses to suffering, the mark of immanence which the disengaged mind cannot obliterate. End of the modern story.

The romantic story ends with Mary Shelley reflecting on Percy's remains, after he lost his life in the wreck of his boat and his body was burnt on the beach in Viareggio. Perhaps Ada's analytical machine could read him back to life. Perhaps the voice calling to Mary from the crowd is Victor's. «Shall we begin again?» (Winterson 2020: 344), she asks herself. The only way to come to terms with the domain of becoming is to understand it as a unity, a series of contingent experiences to be repeated again and again, hardly picturing a *telos*. And this contingency must be inhabited. Heidegger described dwelling as the ability «to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for» (Heidegger 1971: 147). Ry eats and breathes. Mary preserves and cares for. These two forms of sustainable care-taking – self-care and care for others, including the memory of others – is Winterson's final answer to the transhuman simulacrization of life.

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The Article

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