GOLEM - THOMAS RYCKEWAERT

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Between rational and irrational

A Golem is the central figure in a Jewish legend in which a rabbi creates a living entity out of a hump of clay. Different variations of this legend exist; sometimes the creature is made out of human components instead of clay, sometimes the golem serves to protect the jews against a pogrom. A returning element, however, is the quest for the mystery of life, inspired by Jewish Kabballah, and the way in which this life, once created, slips out of the hands of its creator. The story of the golem lives in the realm of stories treating the creation of life out of inanimate matter: e.g. Frankenstein, Pygmalion and the homunculus: an alchemist myth of a little human being that is shaped in a retort. After biological stories of origin ('Darwin-trilogy', 2009-2010) and religious creation stories ('Genesis', 2013), theatre maker Thomas Ryckewaert now focuses on stories of creation in which science, mysticism and human desires cross.

Gustav Meyrink's book is probably the best known registration of the golem story. This German banker and writer was deeply interested in traditions of Kabbalah and alchemy. In Meyrinks time, the early 20th century, there was what could be called a hype around the occult, parallel to the rise of the many scientific developments in physics and chemistry. These exact sciences¬¬ found their way onto the workplace and into people's everyday lives, through electronics and industrialisation. Another "discovery" stemming from that era is the notion of "the subconscious". Freuds insights moved man further away from the center he had positioned himself in. After losing his central position in the universe (Copernicus), his unique role on earth (Darwin) and his economical autonomy (Marx), mankind now ultimately lost control over himself. The neurophilosopher Thomas Metzinger takes it even a step further, stating there is no such thing as a "self" in the first place.

The less man appears to be human, the more he seems to want to prove the opposite by expanding his power over the world. Creating life could be considered as the ultimate, god-like power. Golem plays with the tension between the ratio of science and the irrationality of science's underlying motives and unforeseen consequences.

Science-fiction

The amount of golems surrounding us today seems to grow exponentially. The research on cloning, stem cells and artificial intelligence to top it all, seems to bring the realisation of a real golem very close. It would most likely not be much larger than a small computer. Online, we make tiny versions of ourselves in the form of avatars in games, profiles on social networks and accounts in webshops. We often lose grip on these two last mini-me's as we are not sure what happens with the data and how they are sold or controlled. A puppet player with wrong intentions could conduct his little theatre in horrifying ways. On the other hand, a computer system that tore itself away from the hands of its creator would most likely not act less morally than its maker, rather merciless within its own logic. Today, algorithms have already come to the point where they imitate the racial and gender preferences of their programmers.

The golem-story is science-fiction avant la lettre. In films like Terminator, Robocop, Blade Runner, HER or Ex-Machina, all sorts of artificial life rise up. In Ryckewaert's Golem, the Russian spoken by dancer Tina Breiova is like an echo of Tarkovsky's psychological scifi-film Solaris. This futuristic Russian finds its counterweight in the old, mysterious Hebrew of Efrat Galai – the language of the Kabbalah. Between future and past, someone speaks with a West-Flemish accent: the banality of the present. All three languages are spoken not so much to be understood, but rather for their poetical and associative quality.

It is remarkable that in a lot of these stories, the scientists are male and their creatures female. This idea goes all the way back to Adam and Eve, where the latter was created to remedy the former's loneliness. It also recalls the fact that science has long been a world ruled by men, occasionally wanting to leave its known territory, seeking happiness beyond. Science-fiction often focuses on the point where rational development tips over into emotional consequences.

Tarkovsky's Solaris is a good example of sci-fi story that, besides mentioning an alien life-form, mainly treats man's fears and desires. Indeed, 'Frankenstein' is not the name of the monster, it is the name of the doctor that brought it to life. Golem is, after all, a story about ourselves. About our own desire for control, which paradoxically leads us to losing it. And imagine we do create artificial life, will we be able to communicate with it? Or will our incompatibility stress the loniless that caused its existence in the first place? Maybe the difference between us and the golem is not as big as we thought, maybe we too are creations, torn loose from our creator, as T.S. Eliots' The Hollow Men seems to

assume. The golem too is human, all too human. This creature
longs for love, affection and friendship as well as we do;
emotions that feed the human will to create.

Tripping in the theatre
Meyrinks golem story is laced with dreams and hallucinations.
These hallucinations penetrate our 'conscious' world today. The
blurring of the boundaries between 'fake' and 'real', not in the
least by omnipresent media and virtual realities, makes our world
sometimes look like one large hallucination. In Ryckewaert's
Golem, light, sound, active scenography and suggestive actions
rarely line up to form a clear-cut narrative. It is a fragmented,
audiovisual trip in which everything vibrates. The theatrical
tools are pushed to their limits, up to the point where the whole
theatre-machine seems to fall apart.

The golem also houses in the artist's urge to create. A work of
art often transcends the rational understanding of its maker.
By working with other artists who are specialists in their field
(Erki De Vries - scenography, Giacomo Gorini - light, Senjan
Jansen - sound and Andrea Kränzlin - costumes), by following his
intuition in composing an associative trip and by ultimately
even putting on the work lights and permitting his performers
to improvise, Ryckewaert intentionally seeks to loose control.
His creation allows many different interpretations. That too, is
letting go. Or is that the artwork: the externalised dream of an
artist, an obsession, a wish to bring something into the world,
an unfathomable image that proliferates in the imagination of the
spectator?

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Translated by Hiros