



The creation and multiplication of homunculi (2066-2140)

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'Philosophical History of the Centuries to Come' is an 1860 political, proto-sci-fi work by Italian writer Ippolito Nievo. The novel satirically describes aspects of the history of humanity until the year 2222, notably anticipating actual world events, including the construction of the Isthmus of Suez, the uprisings leading to the Paris Commune, the diffusion of narcotics and the birth of the European Union. We have translated the chapter 'The Creation and Multiplication of Homunculi' into English, where Nievo recounts the invention of the first androids and the aftermath of complete industrial automation as imagined from a 19th-century perspective. The illustration above was created by 2023 artificial intelligence, that is, by an ancestor of the homunculi.

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It used to be chance, that is to say the individual and irregular human activity, that presided over the epochs of the old society. The new society, however, progresses linearly, and this is thanks to industry, that is, thanks to the results of collective and cumulative human activity. We now discuss a scientific revolution that induced the biggest change that has ever occurred in human society; one that, after decades of frightful instability, firmly established itself on the unshakable foundations upon which it now rests.

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The introduction of structured languages; the formation of families; the discovery of navigation, agriculture, and the establishment of cities; the codifications of religious morality; the dogmas of human equality; the invention of gunpowder and the press; the triumph of the freedom of conscience; the use of steam and electricity; the organization of nationalities; universal democratic harmony, and the social implementation of the right to live well: all this led humanity to undergo one metamorphosis after another, so much so that its original state was no longer recognisable. Yet in the human imagination, the revolution we are currently discussing surpasses all others by virtue of the miracle of its cause and the grandeur of its effects.

Everyone can already see that I am referring to the invention of homunculi, also called second-hand men, or auxiliary beings. Their creation, which happened not a hundred and sixty years prior to our century, is already lost in the uncertainties and obscurity of fable; but the best authorities agree in ascribing its merit to Jonathan Gilles, a mechanic and poet from Liverpool. This is how the chroniclers tell the story.

Jonathan Gilles and Teodoro Beridan were neighbours. They both built sewing machines; they both were ingenious, poor, dissolute, and jealous. They used to mutually spy on each other, spreading rumours and stealing each other's methods, customers, and trade secrets.

Then one day all of a sudden, Beridan started to lead a withdrawn life. He ceased to frequent his usual bars, started to neglect his business and stopped going to his workshop. He rarely left the first floor of his house, his lamp would shine through the cracks of the shutters even late into the night. Yet he knew he was being watched, and meticulously covered the cracks. Those few hammer blows, heard over the course of two or three days, became the only sign that the house was actually inhabited.

This made Jonathan suffer all the torments of envy. What is Beridan doing? What kind of supernatural machine is he perfecting? He wondered so much that he decided to find out at all costs, or risk going crazy. One evening he clambered onto the roof of his neighbour, then carefully climbed down the chimney. There, since he knew that the chimney overlooked Beridan's laboratory, he waited for the mystery to unfold behind a pierced fireguard.

He waited and waited until Beridan eventually entered the room. What a wonderful sight to see he wasn't alone! He was with a pale, stiff little man who moved his legs and arms at right angles, and who didn't have a voice, but made guttural sounds that resembled the language of geese. The little man stood in front of the mechanic, like a soldier waiting to learn an exercise. "Sit!", Beridan shouted, and the little man sat.

"Walk!" And the little man walked. "Write!" And the little man sat at the desk, writing down a couple of words. "Always these same two words! Nothing but these two words!" exclaimed the mechanic. "Is there any way I can make his movements respond not just to the springs in his joints, but to the demands of his job?"

"How is it possible?" Jonathan thought behind the fireguard, "one has to implement devices, springs and chemical appliances in a way that they can sense the various obstacles they encounter, adapting themselves accordingly! You may have created an automaton; but my friend, in three or four months, you'll see... I will have created man!"

He rushed back to the roof by the dint of his knees, immediately went into his house and started to work on the embryos of man – that is the automaton. Alas, it didn't matter how much he tried to imagine, execute and test, that damned automaton never worked.

His drive to finish was stronger than his drive to focus on the first steps. As much as he possessed the scientific knowledge required by the task, he lacked the patience. Despite three months of work, the automaton wouldn't move, or if it did, it moved convulsively, like an epileptic.

So one day, head bowed, poor Jonathan knocked at Teodoro's door, announcing that he had to discuss the most important matters. Teodoro welcomed him, and they sat at either side of the fireplace.

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Before revealing his position, Jonathan requested assurance from his neighbour that, should it be necessary for them to collaborate in order to achieve something miraculous, they would do so willingly, without envy, and without quarrelling over the profit, which would be split fifty-fifty. Beridan agreed to everything and listened.

“Well” the other murmured reluctantly, “I found a way to make an artificial-human machine act with near free will in a given sphere of action.”

“You did that?” Beridan exclaimed with anger and greed in his eyes.

Jonathan said emphatically, “Yes, I found it, but to put it to use, I need the human machine itself, which I’ve never been able to assemble in three months.

“Is that all you need?” Beridan exclaimed, wrapping his arms around his colleague. “I made a human machine. Look.”

He opened a cupboard and brought out the goose-sounding automaton.

“You know” Jonathan replied mischievously, “now is neither time for confessions nor compliments; it is time to put our discoveries together and use them as soon as possible to our utmost advantage. With ten of these machines, we will become as rich as the Rothschilds.”

From that conversation onwards, Jonathan and Theodore worked together, mysteriously locked in the latter’s workshop. The neighbours gossiped about this curious turn of events, deeming them madmen. The jokes ceased, however, when the two man-makers came out into the light of day with their son, who was well-trained in the art of shoemaking.

They had decided to programme him for this specific job, as it needed the least amount of movements. And the strange little man, whom they named Adam, worked day and night without food or drink, and created, with exemplary assiduity, a good number of shoes, boots and even ladies’ booties.

While the two creators remained focused on the production of the automatons, the company thrived. Yet, after building half a dozen shoemakers in a month, which brought to a very rich profit, Beridan began to frequent the taverns, drinking large pints of porter and swearing and lying that he was able to fabricate, within a week, the best speaker in the parliament.

Jonathan complained to his colleague about his disturbing behaviour. Disclosing the source of their earnings to the public would subject them to thousands of nuisances, and perhaps even force them to reveal their wonderful secret to others. Beridan objected, saying that he knew perfectly well what he was doing; and when was faced with Jonathan’s further complaints, he threatened to publicly reveal the secret of their manufacturing, thereby ruining their shared business.

Jonathan remained silent. But since he was a sophisticated and resolute man, he retired to his home to reflect, not showing up for three days. Can you imagine how he spent those three days? He fabricated a new homunculus, programmed to pay a visit to his colleague Beridan and stab him twenty times in his ribs. And thus it went.

The man’s muscular strength could not withstand the mechanical force of the automaton; and upon hearing the agonising screams, all the neighbours rushed over to find poor Beridan dying in the arms of a scrawny, yellow little man who had riddled his body with stilettos.

The scene was rendered even more frightening by the fact that surrounding the victim and his executioner, six shoemakers worked quietly, apparently completely unaware of the crime that had just been committed.

It took much shrewdness to imprison the little murderer and to get the six shoemakers away from their workbenches, but eventually,

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they were all brought to trial. Here, once the nature of the crime was clarified, and although what happened seemed impossible, there remained much doubt as to whether Beridan's killer should be charged with moral imputability.

In the end, the prudent English jury agreed to sentence Jonathan Gilles to death, but only as the instigator of a murder. The mechanical homunculus was also sentenced to beheading, having been charged as the offender of premeditated and consummated murder.

Jonathan was prepared to have his head cut off and carry his secret with him to the grave, leaving no heirs other than the six shoemakers and his little co-conspirator, already condemned to an equal fate. However, the administration, the class of honourable industrialists and the best societies of the kingdom were fearful that such a singular art, one which could so profoundly change the conditions of mankind, might be so shamefully lost. They thus implored the king to pardon the culprit, as long as he revealed his manufacturing secret to a board of scientists, philosophers, economists and mechanical engineers.

It is easy to understand that, although resigned to his death, Jonathan accepted the proposal wholeheartedly; and from that moment on, the manufacture of homunculi, or mechanical men, became an industrial business like any other.

Due to the ease of their manufacturing as well as their adaptability to the most varied, risky, and tiring trades, automatons soon became widespread. Their price lowered, and their number soon equalled that of real men. Today, it far surpasses it. And since their existence is indefinitely long, based on how much their mechanisms wear out due to friction, the work involved in their replacement is so minimal that it might seem more like a fun pastime or a useful exercise than anything else.

It is easier to imagine than describe the social and economic changes that occurred as a result of the proliferation of homunculi. It wasn't long before the affluence and idleness enjoyed by every class gave temporary predominance to the peasants, since, still deeply resentful about their recent political losses, retaliated by imposing their tyrannic and ignorant majority onto the other classes.

This evil didn't last past 2210; by then, two generations had already succeeded Gilles' contemporaries and the latest generation had grown up with manners and values so different from the old crude ways. Like most civilised cultures, there were no class distinctions anymore.

It was only idleness that gained too much prominence in society's habits. And along with the use of narcotics such as tobacco, opium and betel nut, a large number of citizens died of stupidity. People who took up study to protect themselves from such misfortunes were prone to cerebral strokes or apoplexy, for which doctors blamed the over-activity in the brain that had been concentrated over two or three generations.

Before 2140, men only made male homunculi, but in that year a son of Jonathan Gilles, heir to one of his secrets, made a female homunculus, or feminuncula. Economists were scared of this innovation as it turned women into surrogates, which could lead to sterility. The son of Gilles was thus monitored as long as he lived so he couldn't tell anyone about the discovery. After he died, Gregory Alison, president of the 10th congress of mankind, ordered the destruction of the entire feline race because the secret of that manufacture seemed to be yeast made from cat liver. The sentence was executed well: women's rights were saved, but the earth was flooded with a bedevilling amount of rats.

I couldn't tell you about the wars, disputes, and religious discussions that took place because of the homunculi. Suffice it to say that in 2180 the Pope excommunicated all the people who fabricated them. However, seeing that the prohibition had little effect, he ordered for the automata to be baptised, so that they would be saved from damnation in case they were in any way animated, while also removed from Satan's influence, in case they were mere instruments created by human activity.

The era of papacies, which lasted from the 5th century to the 23rd—with its first and longest part culminating in 2030, when the destruction of books occurred—ended with these two excommunications.¹

Footnotes & references

[1] The destruction of all the books written before the year 2000 – discussed in the preceding chapter “From the Warsaw Federation to the Peasants’ Revolution” – was ordered in 2030 by Adolfo Kurr, patriarch of the universal republic, who considered books the source of the most “pernicious revolutions”.

Further reading:

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