

Not-an-Individual
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One of the main assertions of modern philosophy is the phrase "God is dead." A while ago DC comics decided that it was time for Superman to die. The resulting issue about Superman's tragic demise sold out immediately in spite of the exceptional number of copies printed. The news instantaneously crossed the globe with newspapers reiterating and needlessly embellishing the facts. Dying in the imaginary realm of comics, Superman was then mourned in the real world with a grief none the less emotional for being directed at a symbol. Symbolic yet authentic because, like that of a movie star or head of state, such lives extend beyond the private and enter as images into our daily existence.

It could be argued that real mortality, the actual termination of human existence, has little in common with an imagined death. This is obvious enough, though we should not forget that while death democratically rots all flesh the same way there are occasions when this means nothing. Marcel Duchamp's gravestone read "d'ailleurs c'est toujours les autres qui meurent" (anyhow it is always the others who die). This difference between "us" and "others" suggests a discrimination at work equally in death as in life. Indeed we view other's death in the most varied ways, attributing a different intensity to those who died "too great" compared with those who died "too little." This is not due to the relative violence of the event, whether fading away slowly in one's sleep as against being caught by a stray bullet on the street, but more to a difference originating in a problem of proportions, or rather of disproportions: the disproportion between the ancient death concealed in an Egyptian pyramid and the insignificant one marked by a cross of two tied branches stuck in the ground.

Similar differences exist in the world of comics. The demise of Donald Duck would not have the same meaning as that of Superman. The comic book fan knows that behind the actions of Superman hides the anonymous and awkward existence of a certain Clark Kent. The shift of scale which separates the pyramid of a pharaoh from the grave of an everyman is, in the world of comic books, embodied in the life of an individual; an individual who can be immensely powerful or insignificant, who, depending on the circumstances, dresses or dresses up, wears a grey suit or a brilliant costume.

In other words, the figure of Superman embodies a precise prototype valid for the specific world of comic books but also for the wider culture. In the life of Superman and his successors there are recurring themes. A superhero has powers that lift him above the anonymous crowd but to keep his true identity a secret the superhero is compelled in everyday life to appear more awkward than that crowd, to make his private life a perpetual farce. A real superhero, also, renounces the advantages he could seek from his powers and sacrifices himself on the altar of common good, accepting in consequence an all too human existence.

If we look carefully such a model is not that far from the way Christianity has recounted the humanization of God. Similarly to the superhero, Jesus is divided between a power of superior origins and a humanization of his divinity which will lead him without escape to death. In the same way that a superhero could but does not rid himself of a romantic rival that ridicules him in front of his love, Jesus decides not to escape the Passion on the Cross. And, if this were not enough to establish the similarity, the words of Mike Carlin, spokesman for DC comics, should end all doubts: "The last hours of Superman symbolically repeat the ultimate stage of the Christian Messiah, with whom he has, anyway, many things in common. Superman, like Jesus, was born Jewish. His father (his creator) was Joe Shuster, son of a very poor Jewish tailor who immigrated to Toronto from Russia."

The Christianization of the Western world marks, not by chance, a fundamental moment in the evolution of the individual. Christ announced a new society which promised to annihilate any differences between slaves and free people (in fact in the Gospel "sin" and "slavery" are words which often go together). Christianity made all people equal before God and masters of their own actions, free to choose between good and evil, meaning with this that the possibility to free

oneself from the slavery of sin belongs to the individual alone. We remember that in Nietzsche's philosophy the superman (übermensch) was the alternative to Christianity. It becomes clear how the idea of the superhero reflects a well known figure of Western philosophy who can be distilled as the sense of all Western thought: man as a measure of the world. In one word: the individual.

Like the Roman Empire with the advent of Christianity, now the United States speaks to the world of a new society based on a dream available to everyone: the possibility for each individual to look for the path to his own fulfillment and to long for the highest levels of wealth and prestige. What could be a better scene to exalt individual affirmation than the American megalopolis? The mass of humanity and the daring architecture of skyscrapers seem conceived to excite people's imagination and make them at the same time like ants. In a city like New York, built on a inhuman scale, it could seem ordinary to see a man flying, his body on fire, like the Human Torch or someone dangling from the rooftops on a web like Spiderman.

From this perspective, the obligation to keep one's identity secret necessitates the failures in private life for the superhero and reflects the anonymity of the masses that the individual intimately hopes to elude. To confirm such a correspondence it may be sufficient to ponder the progressive process of humanization that the authors of superhero stories have imposed on their characters. Since the cold and barely credible powers of Superman there has been a shift towards more and more vulnerable characters. The vulnerability of Hulk, Spiderman, or Daredevil, does not touch their physical powers but relates to those feelings and needs of common humanity from which the superhero is not able to free himself and which inhibit the full pleasure of his powers. The slogan that Marvel Comics used to indicate this state says a lot in turn about certain questions: "superheros with superproblems."

Not-a-Superhero by Luca Buvoli is in a certain sense an artistic and generational consequence of what I have written of above. Generational because we have seen how the dosage of human weakness and superhuman powers is a chemistry which determines, in the structure of the superhero, continuous mutations parallel to those in the social context. Artistic because the imaginary world of this artist initially owed much to the spectacular drawings which illustrated the actions of superheros. It is also a particular debt because Marvel Comics was one of the first publishers to print the names of the writers, pencillers, and inkers for each comic book. Thanks to this decision the comic artists assumed the role of protagonists to the point of embodying the idea of the superhero itself. In the readers' imagination the name Jack Kirby came to overlap that of the Fantastic Four, the slouching anatomies of Steve Ditko became one with Spiderman's writhing, while the vertiginous pages of sharp shadows by Gene Colan were the exact emblem of the blindness of Matt Murdock, the handicapped attorney hidden under Daredevil's mask. To copy the lines of their favorite comic artists became the first step by which some readers got possession of certain powers, and it is actually through the imitation of certain skills with pencil and pen that many of them started to have the confidence to confront the problems of image, of visual language, of addressing the impossibilities of life with artistic solutions.

In effect, the passage from the childlike dream of becoming a superhero to the artistic adventure lived in a mature age is credible enough and easy to understand. But the declaration "I am not a superhero," which could be read as "in the end, I became an artist," presupposes some more specific questions. For example, what kind of artist could be inspired to become a superhero? This question ends up involving certain key subjects of the artistic generation we are discussing.

To provide some helpful coordinates it should be mentioned that Luca Buvoli was born in 1963 (as was this writer). Now thirty years old he is more or less the same age as Spiderman (1962), Daredevil (1964), the Hulk (1962) and the X-Men (1963), the same age as the most famous characters of the Marvel universe. Historically speaking, Buvoli and his contemporaries learn to read and write in 1969, as Man lands on the moon, the U.S.A. struggles in Vietnam, and the student protests attack the values of Western Culture. The direct memories saved of these and other events are vague: the outline of South East Asia in the background of the news or the clumsy movements of a spaceman whose uniform could not compete with the fantastic and avant garde costumes of comic books. Following this generation to when it completes its studies we arrive full in the 80's with the re-election of Ronald Reagan (1984) at the center of a decade lived under the sign of opulence and a faith in the prosperity of the West as well as the devolution of the

personal sphere and a lack of true collective values. In all this AIDS starts to found the basis for a new ethics of the body.

The change in social direction which separates the first few words read and those written by this generation is severe if not total: the intensity of the 60's swallowed by the exuberance of the 80's and the latter dissolved in its own faith. It is in this environment that the generation of 1963 comes to its own Shadow Line, to that point in life where according to Joseph Conrad "One knows well enough that all mankind had streamed that way. It is the charm of universal experience from which one expects an uncommon or personal sensation - a bit of one's own." This Conradian point in life that we could almost locate at the thirtieth birthday has a difficult solution. The direction of culture in these years is obscured by the absence of clear and recognizable opposites, by a West without apparent foes, by a culture hedged into its melancholic decline by emerging cultures modelled after Western standards which in turn attack its soul.

Such a time puts the artist in confrontation with his own individuality. This is a place that can no longer be faced with drunken painterly deeds as was tried by the already exhausted Neo-expressionism. It is a dilemma since our own future seems to provide fewer and fewer independent spaces for the expression of subjectivity. We should not forget that the idea of the individual is at the core of Western thought and is the basis for the West's technological growth and corresponding economic and political creeds. Aesthetically, the meaning of Western art itself, the appreciation of talent through the original creation, the pleasure in a work as the fruit of the single genius, is embodied in the individual. All of this is foreign to other cultures such as some Eastern ones where the idea of repetition evokes a situation close to anonymity and a subjectivity which can be defined in terms of belonging to a group. It is difficult to imagine what will happen to us, our aspirations, when some culture more adaptable than ours to mass uniformity will surpass our models. The fact remains, even if only at a purely intuitive level, a representative of this generation feels the profound crisis of parameters which taught him to handle the relationship between "I" and the external world.

To better define the working space of the current generation one could use the image of a triangle determined by its vertices. The first vertex is the individual facing his concrete borders, whose anxiety enhances the perception of the limits of the body (one of the central subject matters of current art is, not by chance, the body). Secondly, there is language itself which follows the individual in his process of corporalization of tensions (also here it is possible to notice that in recent years the idea of language has suffered the artistic efforts of an unceasing objectification). Thirdly, there is a new and in certain aspects shapeless feeling of existence. Different from both the individual and language, it remains inconsistent, without supporting bases. Let us imagine the actual feeling of this existence as a gaseous limbo in which things fluctuate without coordinates, without the possibility of distinguishing high from low, the center from the side. (In reporting this one should note that others have already analyzed the germs of a new existentialism in the attitudes of the emerging generation.)

Revisiting the artistic road of Luca Buvoli from his younger works to the present, Not-a-Superhero, it is possible to recognize the shape of this triangle made of corporal individualism, physical language, and existence. The beginnings of his research are dependent upon an obsessive passion for running and it does not take long to trace the link between a superhero's power and the physical cult inherent in a sport. All this without forgetting that running is one of the most solitary and individual of practices where we are always fighting with ourselves in order to best our own time.

Buvoli's artistic experiences marked by the idea of an individual overcoming his own body showed a close link between text and image, the same link which characterizes the comic book. His works were words materially recomposed on the wall, a continuous interpenetrating of language and real space, as in the series Sfondo (which means "background" but also "I'm breaking through") where the word had been made flesh and hung on the wall. The rough and poor materials had a strong sense of physicality but their colorlessness, transparency, and fragility competed with the neutral and "abstract" paleness of the white wall.

The idea of a place of concrete language later took a more definite shape in the series Exercises in Perspective where the same sensitivity, the balance between the discarded object and

an allusion to immateriality (plexiglass, minimal threads, torn pieces of old clothing, etc.) were used to rebuild with a feeling of physical precariousness the rigidly codified space of Renaissance perspective. In particular, the figurative allusions were the typical checkerboard floors of 15th century paintings which created the sensation of lines converging towards the horizon, towards the supreme point of the work: the perspective point, metaphor for the centrality of man facing the spectacle of the world.

In order to support the arguments pursued above I would like to move into a more personal tone, quoting a letter recently sent to me by the artist: "It's been a while since Nietzsche's superman has replaced the ones in comics, a while since Merleau-Ponty's inner-body has transformed the one by Gene Colan. Still I needed that specific temporal structure and that specific combination of text and image to express my autonomy; words became physical traces, jutting out from the paintings or carved into them until they became things trying to spell out the carnality of language with wire, paper, cloth, and plastic on the white wall, the rest (perspectives, backgrounds) you already know. But only a year ago, after I completed *Running Out of the Blue* [(1992), another installation about running, in 1:4 scale and in 'baby blue'], I felt the need to face again the comic book and particularly that aspect which has been so important for my approach to art: the superhero."

We notice then one of these re-appropriations. That something is coming from the past is clear in the title *The Return of Dr. Logos*. The story is easy to summarize. The protagonist Not-a-Superhero is wandering in an imprecise space. He has exceptional senses, capable of perceiving the sound of a heartbeat, of feeling in his bones the vibrations of a human footstep, of pronouncing impossible words through embarrassment alone. The price is an extreme physical affliction, to be blind, or mute, or deaf. These handicaps come from desiring to surmount one's finiteness, of longing for something more than the fragility of the body or the fragmentary nature of the soul. One finally arrives at the awareness that to become a superhero is an absurd aspiration and that a negation imprints the very core of his existence.

The surrounding space seems to become tighter and tighter. It compresses his body until the ability to orientate is annihilated. Not-a-Superhero sees himself disappear, separating from the muscles he had cultivated in the illusion of overcoming. What remains are only his own words enclosed in the classic dialogue bubble of the comics. But this process of dissolving does not stop and Not-a-Superhero becomes immaterial, a dot in the mathematic space of a Cartesian grid or better a series of numbered dots which could be joined with a line as in a game to form the approximate shape of his lost body.

And it does not end this way. The last echo of physical existence is removed and the voice disappears while Not-a-Superhero, reduced to a diagram, wonders what power could do so much. The enemy appears: Dr. Logos. His body is a massive checkerboard where words fit into boxes like in a crossword puzzle, but the words combine senselessly. Not-a-Superhero immediately recognizes him as the "supreme danger," the cause of the collapse of his own body and of the solid reality of things. There is no other choice except to face Dr. Logos in a desperate fight. The battle is uneven: the enemy's language absorbs all physical blows and turns them into traps, into the absence of meaning.

At the end of their fight we find Not-a-Superhero hurled outside his own body, torn away from any chance of providing meaning. In spite of his complete emptiness there is still the temptation to exist. One cannot understand its source nevertheless something is still stating an identity. The exhausted Not-a-Superhero can say, "I am confused therefore I exist." It is exactly this final confession that saves him from complete annihilation since Dr. Logos vanishes instead of delivering the fatal blow. One cannot understand the reason for this act of compassion. Maybe it isn't even compassion since it is very possible that Dr. Logos cannot record consciousness when not in the presence of a body or a presence attributing meaning through language, which in the end is the same thing.

The description of this fight seen from the larger perspective of that of the generation from 1963 is a description of the context in which this generation is forced to suffer from the difficulty of self-affirmation. It should be clear that behind Not-a-Superhero there is a menace to identity and that behind these imaginary handicaps, the origin of the hypersensitivity, there is an allusion to a more substantial lack. Not-a-Superhero means Not-an-Individual.

It is, therefore, inevitable that Not-a-Superhero's enemy is Dr. Logos. We have fondled him, spoiled him, nourished and made him grow too much, this promising child that we Westerners have named Language. A long time ago it was known as logos and indicated the human attitude to the word, our instinct to place things in relationships, to unite in order to build cities. Subsequently, with an etymology approximate but functional enough for our discourse, we call it locus, in Italian luogo (place) that in some Italian dialects is even closer: logo. At present logo indicates a trademark, a graphic sign, a symbol to recognize immediately a product. In sum the minimum common identity always ends up carrying the name Language, our favorite luogo (place).

We have put language before anything else. It is our Bible and it is the means that allowed us to say without intermediaries: "I." Thanks to it we have discovered the structures of technology and we have elevated Art above habit and the natural course of life. By virtue of this we have been able to determine a form of human eternity and to build or at least to plan an Eden. But the price we had to pay – the separation between words and things, the conflict between individual and collective needs, the necessity to always attribute a meaning – is becoming unsolvable and has driven us towards an increasing impoverishment. Somewhere else outside the Western world they are using our models as things in themselves instead of fragments of human consciousness. They can use or discard according to new practicalities with an objectivity that even the most materialist among us could never imagine.

The set is the following: superheros with dismembered bodies reassembled with fragments of clothing of the homeless. Because the individual today is without a fixed home, he carries away what can be remembered. But in this slow agony, redemption may still be possible. It may be possible to understand the ways of the world and, perhaps maintain direction. We are permitted to recognize this hope in the extreme, sincere, true, and certain lament of Not-a-Superhero: "I need some food." Then a dim light confirms that it is not yet the end of our story.

Between two parentheses we read with relief: "To be continued."