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ASSOCIAZIONE ITALIANA DIRITTO E LETTERATURA

Bioethics, Biolaw and Literature
Verona, May 8-10, 2009

Bioethics and biolaw represent the new frontiers in today's culture and everyday life and encompass many different situations. Constant and astounding progress in medicine and technology has brought man to accomplish things he never would have thought possible and overcome obstacles that had been considered insurmountable for centuries. Life and death are no longer determined solely by nature or external circumstances, and living beings, in their entirety or in parts of them, can now be created at will. While being a window of great opportunity, these discoveries also give rise to considerable problems as to where to draw the line where scientific experiments (especially controversial ones) are concerned, and what status to attribute to these created beings. In fact, this rapidly developing situation is still uncontrolled, for the law in its present state is incapable of moving at the same pace. There is therefore a legal void regarding many issues such as personhood, the extent to which one has ownership of his or her life, and the legal status of liminal beings such as clones, robots or hybrid creations.

Such considerations were the starting point of the conference, which through numerous and diverse papers and their discussions, provided much food for thought on the difficulties and possible starting points, if not solutions, to these issues. One thing that was made quite clear is the fact that any possible solution must be of an interdisciplinary nature. Because today's bioethical dilemmas are due to an indistinguishable mixture between science, law and ethics: in fact, the first step towards a resolution is to be found in a heightened knowledge that can comprise such disciplines. Law for instance, though currently insufficient for determining cases that involve euthanasia and liminal beings' rights, is nevertheless necessary, for it provides indispensable guidelines and has the purpose of guaranteeing the subject its privacy and voice. In order to do so, however, it must find a way of creating norms that can be applied to individual cases and realise that personhood must go beyond humanity and nature (Gaakeer).

Literature in this sense has proven itself most useful, in that it often anticipates or cautions by narrating of cases that have not occurred yet but at times eventually have (Bassetto). This is especially the case in postmodernism, which through its search for novelty and enhancement, mirrors and challenges the current situation. It also refuses borders and goes beyond its comfort zone to seek and express different perspectives, thus giving importance to matters that are usually not considered, solving certain dilemmas, or creating new ones. New literary genres, such as manga, could become important indicators on how culture and mentality have changed in today's society and how consolidates dogmas and stereotypes may be further questioned.

Language however is inadequate if not sustained by knowledge and personal experience. Medical practice therefore comes into play as the background and explanation

of scientific experiments, life and disease from a more "technical" perspective. Literature may assist practitioners as a valuable source of hypothetical cases and alternative points of view by focusing on humanity and the importance of the Hippocratic Oath. It portrays the dilemmas and emotions of patients, physicians, and their families, and the empathy or indifference that serious diseases can provoke. Medicine however is incapable of solving all problems, and controversies arise when it becomes necessary to choose between a life with an uncertain amount of suffering and a peaceful decease. Euthanasia in fact is still not considered legal in many current legislatures, often leaving morality to dictate what is supposedly "right" and "wrong". This makes any decision regarding euthanasia more difficult, for it clashes with both religious beliefs on the right to voluntarily discard the life that has been given by a higher power, and with the Hippocratic Oath by which life must be conserved and safeguarded at all costs. It has become a seemingly irrational matter of determining who owns one's life and if the right to live entitles also to the right to die. In Anna Quindlen's *One True Thing* (Apostoli) and in Isabel Allende's *Vida Interminable* (Sesta), the suffering caused by cancer is such that patients deem death the only way to maintain their dignity and integrity. Furthermore, in the latter case Roberto, a doctor compelled to inject his dying cancerous wife a lethal poison, asserts that euthanasia should be contemplated but also regulated with by the law.

An important issue raised during the conference under many guises consisted in establishing one's identity, which could potentially influence the subject's position before the law and the world. This could happen in many ways and degrees, and has been further complicated by scientific and technological breakthroughs. Darwinism for instance, among its many contributions, pointed out that people are innately different one from another. The new sciences it gave life to soon branched out to include politics and question whether those who were deemed "unfit" to their convenience (for example, the native urban proletariat or the alien immigrant) should be eliminated or not (Bezrucka). Such an assumption would lead one to believe that ethics should be bound to certain scientific and biological criteria. In H.G. Well's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (Carpi) the invasion of science in humanity and legality with malicious intents and its disregard of ethics is most obvious. The fact that Moreau's creatures are chimeras created by his manipulations of the human and non human and subjected to his tyrannical law demonstrates how important it is for the law to not only command but also step in and protect subjects such as these which may not be human but are nevertheless entitled to basic rights.

More recently, in cases of reconstructive and cosmetic surgery, the medical intervention is aimed at substituting something that is missing or defective, or enhancing and improving a person's outside appearance (Battisti). Biotechnology therefore can completely change a person's body and outer identity (i.e. that governed by worldly stereotypes), but the person's mind remains. The difference between the two types of surgery at first appears obvious, given that in the former case the change is seen as necessary, whereas the latter is often driven by purely aesthetic reasons. The line is less clear however when voluntary amputation and/or limb substitution to enhance physical performance is taken into consideration, or when cosmetic surgery changes the patient's sense of identity such as in Fay Weldon's *She Devil*. In this novel in fact the protagonist undergoes numerous surgical operations to resemble her rival in love, and sees this as a way of forcefully fitting herself into a world that would otherwise not accept her but gradually loses her own identity, including her voice, considered a person's indispensable essence.

"Voice" therefore is linked to identity and could be considered another of the conference's keywords: ethically, it represents the subject's right to expression and denunciation. This is not a new topic, for in history there have always been silenced subjects: these include the mentally instable, the disabled, the biologically abnormal and even women. These are all subjects that have been excluded from normal consideration and interaction within society, which brings to the question of how they can be protected

and to what extent others can and must speak in their place (Ward). Wives, and especially insane wives (for insanity was often associated with femininity), for example lost their social and legal independence the moment they married, because their identity was united with, and ultimately annulled by, their husbands'. In a recent case in England two conjoined infant twins were surgically separated by law, bringing about the death of the "weaker" twin (making this the first case of a legalised assault on an innocent person in English history) to save the "stronger" twin, regardless of their parents' wish not to do so (Watt). It is in such cases that ethics must come into play to assure that these vulnerable subjects are well taken care of to the best of the law's possibility.

Another breach in the natural conception of identity occurs even more evidently in novels that deal with the creation of new beings, a case which was often contemplated throughout the conference. It is important to understand if and how these characters think and behave in order to deliberate on the possibility or not that they could be seen as people. Spike, the robotic protagonist of Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (Adami) is emblematic in this sense because, although being a robot through and through, her personality and possession of emotion, memory and thought brings humans to love her as one of their own, even when her body is dismantled and she is left with only her head. The most quoted novel in terms of creation however was Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, presented both in its original version and through some of the many works that stemmed from it, i.e. Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (Carbone, Monti*)*, and Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* (Fiorato). Doctor Frankenstein's creature is nameless, excluded from the community, but perceived himself as a whole. The more recent works, on the contrary, both present completely different creatures, which/who are both female, active within society, aware of their origin, and in pursuit of their independence. These two females also share the need to be legally recognised to possess their own identity: Patchwork Girl (who has all the names of the women who make up in her body) decides to buy her own name instead of simply naming herself, and in *Poor Things* Bella becomes a person by law and her creator's legal heir thanks to the help of a corrupt lawyer. This proves that the concepts of legal being and human being don't always coincide, and that those who have a "name" have a sense of identity.

Considering the importance of voice and name another interesting case is that of Gollum, in *The Lord of the Rings* (Costantini). The seemingly innocuous Hobbit Smeagol changes body, voice, and language after submitting himself to the Ring of Power's rule. He is also shunned by his family and is called "Gollum" because of the noises he makes. The fact that his change in alliances consequently causes a change in all relevant factors in considering identity and in his legal status could perhaps be a confirmation of their importance in determining the conditions of personhood.

The presentation of the novel *Goodness*, presented by its author Tim Parks, finally mended the gap between fiction and real life by telling a true story. It was an immensely anticipatory work, in that twenty years ago it narrated the hardships of the parents of a disabled girl with many controversial considerations and ended with euthanasia. The overwhelming reflections that arise on such occasions on the righteousness or not of the parents' decision to end their daughter's suffering without her having a say (and possibly an idea of what was happening) represented an important landmark for future considerations on the matter. This first enlightening conference on bioethics, biolaw and literature therefore ended with a more heightened awareness of the urgency and omnipresence of issues concerning identity, ethics and rights of subjects of all sorts before the law, and with an ending that was as open as a postmodern novel.

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