

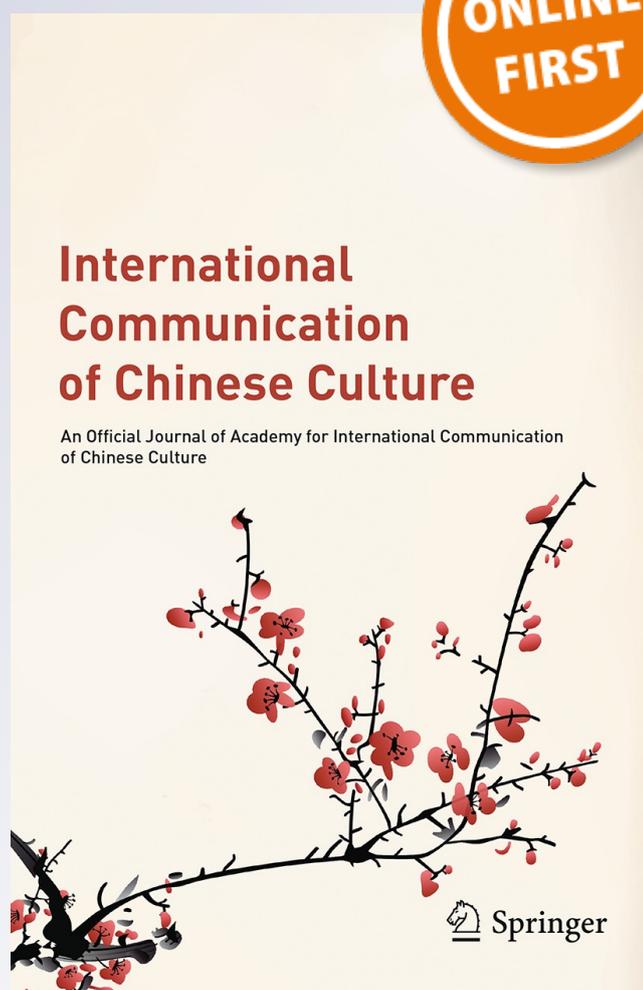
# *Don Giovanni, Faust and the western modernity*

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## Don Giovanni, Faust and the western modernity

Roberto Gigliucci<sup>1</sup> 

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**Abstract** This article is focused on the myths of Don Giovanni and Faust as emblems of Western culture and sensibility. The historical and literary iter is interrelated with an anthropological point of view. The target of the essay is to offer an outstanding example of Western way of thinking and civilization in implicit comparison with Eastern ones.

**Keywords** Don Giovanni · Faust · Modernity

This short essay is about the two myths of Don Giovanni and Faust as paradigms of western modernity.

Both characters are joined by the mood of despair. But in the case of Don Giovanni the refusal of every kind of metaphysics is neat and lucid, and the involvement in the physical reality—as the only possible one—is enthusiastic and full of vitality. On the other hand, in Marlowe's *Faustus* the despair is a conscience of an exclusion from the beatitude and salvation (symbolized by the river of Christ's blood that inundates the heaven), and this desperation is evident just in the first monologue of the play.

The two characters are two masks of modernity, which embodies the spirit of doubt, of desire of sensual delight and of knowledge, but with an insatiable tension towards something of sparkling and ephemeral. The representation of punishment is an exquisitely theatrical element, a sort of a stage machinery, which yet doesn't elude definitely the central issue: the situation of modern man in his new solitude,

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far from heaven, far from the transcendent, far from God, looking at a sky where the stars are only celestial bodies in a world mathematically organized.

So the history of Don Giovanni<sup>1</sup> coincides with the history of modernity, from the first decades of Seventeenth Century towards the crucial refoundation of the myth by Molière, to the dramas and melodramas of the Eighteenth Century and finally to the supreme investigation on Don Giovanni' ambiguity in the opera by Mozart. Later we observe a sort of *fragmentation* of the character of Don Giovanni, up to the demystifying plays and novels of the late modernity.

The case of Faust<sup>2</sup> is different: in the work re-elaborated by Goethe we find a reconstructed harmony, a labyrinth that ends with the redemption and a mystic triumph. Indeed this happy ending doesn't result in the western culture, while the old version of Faustus' is generally restored in the European imaginary.

Don Giovanni was first portrayed in *El burlador de Sevilla* by Tirso da Molina, although his origins are darker and deep-rooted in the folk-tales tradition. The Ur-Don Giovanni is an atheist, a man who scoffs at the dead and kicks the skulls in the cemeteries, as the Leontius of a German Jesuitical play (but we are told that it came from Italy). At the end of the history, Leontius is punished by the skeleton previously offended by him and he is literally smashed against the wall. Yet Faust in the German book by Spies (falling of Sixteenth Century) was also crashed and squashed. The punishment must be absolute, devastating.<sup>3</sup>

So, the birth of Don Giovanni, (with the invitation to the dead at dinner as picturesque element), is the birth of the modern western atheism. Through the Baroque era, the free libertine thought and the materialism (often clandestine) are a mark of modernity, from Vanini to Spinoza, towards the next outcomes of the Enlightenment. Don Giovanni is a fellow of the so called *esprits forts*, particularly in the Molière's avatar, after the middle of the Century. And if in the popular Don Giovanni of the *Commedia dell'arte* the punishment was a right ending, but merely theatrical and coming after a *pastiche* of buffooneries and noble stereotypical *tirades*, just in Molière's *pièce* the final punishment is a bit incongruous, because the reasons of the materialist Dom Juan are more convincing than the ridiculous apologies of the religion exposed by the servant Sganarelle. Actually, the moralistic reactions to the Molière's play were justified. Dom Juan is a man who trusts only in the physical realm, in the mathematical rules and finally in the man. He gives a handout to the poor only *pour l'amour de l'humanité*. Molière introduces into the diabolic heritage of the character a sort of nobility and paradoxical magnanimity: beforehand he had asked the poor for a blasphemy, in exchange for money, but once he receives a negative answer, he gives the offering just for love of humankind, breaking any link with religion, that is with God. For Dom Juan love is not an horizontal connection guaranteed by the vertical metaphysical relationship with God. Human world is nothing but human.

But there is the other side of Don Giovanni, the thirst for sexuality and power. He wants to possess every woman in the world, he tenaciously desires to enlarge himself, we can say, to extend his desire in all directions. He is fundamentally a

<sup>1</sup> In the huge critical literature about Don Giovanni see at least Raffaelli (2006), with ample bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> See Orvieto (2006).

<sup>3</sup> See Macchia (1991).

collector, and the *list* symbolizes his obsessive nature and striving toward the infinite. The topic of the list is not present in the *Burlador* by Tirso; we begin to find it in the Cicognini's and Andreini's works, and much later the scene of the list is successfully adopted in Da Ponte's and Mozart's opera. It should be pointed out however that Tirso is not interested in the pattern of the catalogue for his character. Don Juan is a young aristocratic rascal, confident of his privileges, insensible to metaphysical problems, while a collector has something of senile and anxious. The list is similar to the portrait of Dorian Gray: Don Giovanni is active and joyful, but the increasing number in the list of the women that he dated testifies the ageing and the decay of the hero. It may seem paradoxical, but this hermeneutical perspective introduces to the true problem of Don Giovanni: how to link the atheistic and the womanizer?

Many scholars, particularly in recent times,<sup>4</sup> have underlined the importance of the atheistic and materialistic substance of the Don Giovanni's myth, while the mainstream considers only the aspect of *dongiovannismo*, that is the nature of casanova, of seducer, decreasing in this manner the cultural relevance of the character. Then, it is necessary to find a deep relationship between these two parts of the mask of Don Giovanni to understand the real complexity of his myth. Certainly a possible answer is that the unbelievability of Don Giovanni, as a challenge to the Heaven (*le Ciel*, a word endlessly repeated in Molière's play), involves directly a libertine behaviour, whose main manifestation is the seduction of women. The "womanizing" should be a consequence of the perverse and diabolic will of power of a man who puts himself over everybody else. Don Giovanni has a serious difficulty to relate himself with the alterity. Two images of otherness should be pointed out: God and the woman. Both of them transcend Don Giovanni, and he cannot suffer this. So he negates God and the spirituality, and on the other hand he *negates* women too, cheating them, exerting an absolute power over them, eventually inserting them in the list, id est reducing them to a mere name, a way of murdering them.

This is probably the reason why we are still interested in this modern myth, that cannot be reduced to a dull example of aristocratic machismo. However it is impossible to identify the issue of the materialism and to neglect the intercourses with women. If we consider these two Don Giovanni's components as he struggles against the otherness, we may feel the terrible solitude of this apparently exuberant hero. The *redde rationem* of the *dénouement* is not necessarily a divine punishment, but it is an encounter with death, face to face of the end. If Don Giovanni believes only in the infinite expansion of himself, the collision with the definitive limit seems for him unbelievable. But the collision occurs, and this tragedy horrifies all of us.

The nature of tragedy of Don Giovanni's tale is incredibly evident in the musical version of the Da Ponte's libretto offered to Mozart. Certainly *Don Giovanni* is one of the few capital masterpieces of the western civilization—perhaps the most important. What is very relevant for me is to make some observations about the last (or better the penultimate last) scene, when the statue of Commendatore comes to dine at Don Giovanni's home. This was the scene that the audience waited for, on the popular stages and in the sophisticated theatres, since nearly two centuries. This was

<sup>4</sup> F. i. Curi (2002) and Escobar (2014).

the scene of the punishment, of the fantastic revenge of the statue and of the final machinery with the fall of the protagonist in the Hell's flames. Obviously, the treatment of this scene in the *opera giocosa*, particularly during the Eighteenth Century, had been mixing serious elements with comic elements. We found this mix in the libretto of Bertati, which is a direct source for Da Ponte. Moreover in the verses of Da Ponte we have tragedy and comedy together, with more elegance, but with the same lightness. The *controcanto* of the servant Leporello is comic, even though without the vulgarities of previous plays. And also in the dialogue between the Commendatore and Don Giovanni verbal irony occurs («Pentiti scellerato!/No vecchio infatuato!» etc.). With the music of Mozart everything changes. Instead we have no more comic hints, we have only the most tragic scene of the melodramatic tradition. Don Giovanni is a man in front of the Absolute, in front of Eternity, in front of Death. And also in front of the Power, of something more powerful than him. The music combines different sublime themes, the rhythm *ostinato* of the Commendatore, his chromatic inhuman language, the human anxiety of violins, the insistent spirals of ascending and descending scales and so on. Mozart refines the modern feature of Don Giovanni, bringing out the extreme ambiguity and complexity of the myth. Is Don Giovanni really guilty? Is his tragedy only the right tragedy of the punishment of a felon or is it also *our* tragedy? Is his guilt of demanding the infinite a *speculum damnationis* or is it an hyperbole of *our* own desire of living forever?

Western mankind seems to require the eternity on the earth. In his regard, Faust is a perfect model of modern feelings. If the universe is endless, as the new science teaches, why I cannot be unlimited likewise? Giordano Bruno lived for a short period in England, where Marlowe wrote his *Faustus*. The infinity of universe is an intuition of extraordinary importance for the modern civilization, very close to some current cosmological hypothesis. In the cultural context of Bruno and Marlowe, the naturalistic science was still linked with the magic. And this is the art that Faustus chooses at the opening of the play, refusing philosophy, medicine, law and eventually theology. The enthusiasm for necromancy is justified by the prospect «of power, of honour, and omnipotence» (v. 81). Faustus wants to be superior to everybody and to everything: «a sound Magician is a Demi-god » (v. 89). But this violent desire is based on the impossibility of the salvation. *Stipendium peccati mors est*, Faustus reads in the Epistle of Saint Paul, and in the first Epistle of Saint John is written that we all are sinners. So, misunderstanding the Christian message, Faustus is sure that the everlasting death is our common destiny, and then the Theology doesn't offer any attractiveness for him. He knows obstinately that he is proscribed by the Heaven, and consequently his basic mood is the *despair*, in spite of his incredible and fantastic adventures. Despair is the *mot-clé* of the entire play: «Damned are thou Faustus, damned, despaire and die» (v. 1724: the same couple of verbs in the *Richard III* by Shakespeare). At the end, nothing will save Faustus, not even a drop of Christ's blood that «streames in the firmament» (v. 1939).

What is the importance of the myth of Faust for western sensibility? I think it is just the idea of the damnation. Not necessarily a religious punishment. We are all condemned, condemned to die for ever. The *everlasting death* is the final obstacle to our thirst for a total knowledge and a total possession of everything on earth. *On*

*mourra seul*, and Faust dies in solitude, as well as Don Giovanni, like everybody else does. Being men is being condemned, this is the hidden significance of the two myths of Faust and Don Giovanni.

But Faust, in Goethe's masterpiece, is saved. However also Don Giovanni in some literary works finds a conclusive redemption: this happens f. e. in the *Âmes du Purgatoire* by Mérimée. On the other hand, Faust rides down to the Hell in the magnificent opera *La damnation de Faust* by Berlioz. Every myth knows its variations, and this is just one of the main characteristic of the *Arbeit am Mythos*. Any case, the restored harmony of Goethe's universe is only an hypothesis. The counterbalance of Marlowe and Goethe represents the ambiguity and contradiction of the myth, and of the western civilization *tout court*.

We think then that Don Giovanni and Faust are two emblems of the western secularization and, at the same time, of our fear of the ending. We recognise the materialism as the unique objectivity, after the "massacre of illusions" (think of Leopardi, f. i.), but we horrified by thinking to our end. Don Giovanni symbolizes the euphoric side of this spiritual condition, he is the conqueror, the winner, the cheater, but his nature of *collector* shows also his neurosis, his abstraction and his solitude. Faust stands for our despair, our restlessness, our gravity and buffoonery together, our infelicity. Both the heroes are emblematic of will of power, and also of lust: in Don Giovanni it is evident, in Faustus the lust is elevated up to the contemplation of the supreme beauty, Helena, «fairer than the evenings aire./clad in the beauty of a thousand starres» (vv. 1781–1782), «der Schönheit Quelle », as Goethe's Faust says (v. 6489). But the adoration lasts for the short time of a brief monologue, and the despair returns into the Faustus' lab, while Goethe's Faust loses Helena and his consciousness. We all know that at the very ending of Goethe's work the *Ewig-Weibliche* is the agent of the salvation. But Mephistopheles had earlier declared his preference for the *Ewig-Leere*, the eternal void. Is it easier to believe in the supreme spirituality or in the total vacuum? I think that also in the case of Goethe's Faust we may find a double tension: towards the *Licht* that redeems the *Vergängliche* (i.e. the transient, the impermanent) and towards the dark of the annihilation. Undoubtedly the intense horror of Goethe for the nothingness and the shadow drove him to find a bright solution. But this is an additional signal of the instable balance between glory and destruction.

A final element of the imagery of Don Giovanni and Faust is the revolt against the authority. This is a factor of enormous importance in western culture. Don't forget that the French revolution occurs just two years after the *première* of Mozart's opera. But the violence against the authority is expressed *maxime* in the scenes of Molière's play. After the visit of Dom Luis, father of Dom Juan, during which the parent attempts to bring back the son on a right way, and after the *exit* of the disappointed and fierce father, the protagonist comments: «Eh! Mourez le plus tôt que vous pourrez, c'est le mieux que vous puissiez faire» (IV, v). This is an extreme and outrageous offense, a provocation from the stage to the audience of the play. The indifference for the father and the icy calm hatred of the son represent the most symbolic refusal of any authority in Don Giovanni. The French immediate predecessors of Molière, Dorimond and Villiers, authors of *Festins de Pierre*, had been more audacious in the scene of the offense to the father, up to the surplus of

unreal violence: Dom Juan arrives to hit and kick his parent. Molière is more realistic and sober, but probably more atrocious in his verbal laconic brutality.

The father is like God (and like the King—possibly executed); in Andreini's hypertrophic version of the *Convitato di Pietra* (half of Seventeenth Century) Don Giovanni is an exaggerated Titan who challenges every divinity and feels himself as a God. Then again, the *Historia von D. Johann Fausten* (1587) by Spies shows a sacrilegious necromancer, hungry of knowledge, but sad and desperate, who thought to be higher than God (chapt. I).

The symbolic killing of the authority, however, backfires on the killers: the final destiny is the death, and Death's authority is absolutely invincible. The "punishment" is formerly incidental to the human condition. Every revolt ends in darkness. The myths of Don Giovanni and Faust are truly non political. They unveil our evanescent dignity and our radical desperation. Definitely, Goethe's Faust, before his death, achieves great results for the sake of mankind and dies imagining a future in which he could grasp the full beauty of the instant. And this is a kind of "social" redemption of the antisocial *par excellence*, Faust, the isolated, who visits every places of the world without being the citizen of any of them. But Goethe's creation is only a window on Faust, an attempt to restore the anxiety in spiritual radiance. Many Faust of XIXth and XXth Centuries are radically melancholic, desperate, even confused, sometimes *Übermenschen*, sometimes nihilistic, at last transformed in a blind non-being (think to the work by Pessoa).

The diffraction of the characters of Don Giovanni and Faust after Mozart and Goethe is too complex to follow here and now; the birth of modernity, between falling Renaissance and early Baroque, has been the cradle of these two myths, and also the cradle of our new critical and scientific spirit and the incunabula of our clear awareness of the end.

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