

THE NAME OF OUR NAME

By Michael Ventura

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My trusty two-volume *Columbia-Viking Desk Encyclopedia* -- ragged books, on my writing desk since high school -- reports that Prometheus, in Greek, means "forethought," and that he was the Titan who gave humanity fire and the arts. Zeus disapproved, punishing Prometheus by chaining him to a mountaintop where a vulture devoured the immortal's liver in continuous torture, until Zeus' errant half-human son Hercules freed the tortured giant. (We know now that Hercules was aided by Xena the Warrior Princess -- at least, that's what I saw on TV. An interesting addendum: to add a female principle to what was strictly a male story.) According to this legend, the arts are not of human origin, but were given as a divine gift, and a rebelliously divine gift at that. The gift of a divine who defied divinity. So every human creation, the legend says, is a wresting of energies that are higher than we are, and the result must always be dangerously mixed: Emanating from human creativity is an energy beyond human comprehension or control.

Why would Forethought (Prometheus) do such a thing? What could he have been fore-thinking? Whatever it was, the legend says that the arts, which have created and re-created human identity, over and over, began as an act of rebellion and theft. Of course, the legend is itself a human creation that depicts humanity rebelling against itself, against its own sense of order (Zeus), to engage in a dangerous, unpredictable act of self-extension -- and then punishing and freeing itself. In the wild, tigers and sparrows, ants and salmon, deer and lizards, don't behave this way -- they don't go against their own nature and sense of order. Humanity is the species whose nature it is to rebel against, and so extend, its own nature.

Why? The Greek legend is one colorful depiction. We've since come up with more elaborate, less playful explanations, but we are still the creatures who rebel against our own natures (in order to extend our natures). For the last several centuries the tangible results of that rebellion have been called "progress" -- a rebellion gone way out of hand.

Our identity as a species and our identities as individuals (interlocking identities that are not at all the same) have been defined by this rebellion. Well, "defined" is too stable a word. Rather say, the conditions of how we achieve our identities have been set by this state of rebellion against ourselves, against each other, and against our circumstances.

Or say this:

At birth we are given a name. Something within, which we do not understand, presses outward against that name; and the forces of the world, which we do not control, press inward against that name. Somewhere in the midst of this is a consciousness we call "I" that's trying to deal with it. Through this constant state of being pressured from within and without, we are shaped. The pressures never stop so the shape never stays quite the same. Nevertheless, it is pretty much continuous and recognizable. That shape is what we call our identity: the name of our name.

Psychology, science, literature, sociology, religion, whatever -- are all methods of describing and extending and profiting from this fundamental state, and the practice of

these methods at least keeps many employed and off the streets. But the changes wrought by our studies and our knowledge are more quantitative than qualitative. Which is to say: Much is added, but little is taken away. Society has become a surreal, baroque, chaotic elaboration of our given condition, but the basic deal remains unchanged: We are creatures whose nature it is to rebel against our nature, and we achieve our sense of identity, or the lack of it, according to whether our particular rebellion is viable or not. We fight ourselves to be ourselves. By that struggle we shape ourselves often into something very different from how we started. That shape is our identity. The name of our name. The content of our name.

Ugh. All this abstraction. It's my poor attempt to speak about the nature of identity without reducing the discussion to jargon. (Note: "reducing the discussion to jargon" is now what largely passes for "higher education.") I invite, I beg, other and better attempts. For we'd better find telling ways to discuss the fundamental issue of identity, because our rebellious species is on the verge of technologies that will overwhelmingly threaten identity in ways that no legends (except perhaps Ovid's) ever imagined.

As usual with great historical shifts, the first indications go largely unnoticed or misunderstood or both.

Last month a movie was released titled (perhaps more accurately than its makers were aware) *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*. The creation of Hironobu Sakaguchi, it is a computer-animated film of stunning visual accuracy. *Final Fantasy* combines comic-book dialogue with derivative metaphysics. Though it has its moments and a nervy ambivalent ending, the film was roundly and rightly dumped on -- as a film. But as a technology it was generally underestimated. Some of the characters looked comic-book; but two or three looked pretty real. In 10 years, surely 20, and perhaps much less, it will be possible to portray human beings on the screen without the use of human beings. This was largely discussed as a Hollywood problem: What will the poor actors do? But that's the least of the questions this technology will raise.

The dialogue of *Final Fantasy* was dubbed by human actors. Soon that won't be necessary. On July 31, *The New York Times* reported a new software, Natural Voices, created by a "speech team" at AT&T Labs. It recreates the human voice more accurately than any previous software. *The Times* quoted one James R. Fruchterman, who has tested the believability of Natural Voices on blind people: "Just like you can't trust a photograph anymore, you won't be able to trust a voice either."

The rebellion that we call "progress," being what it is, leaves no doubt that these visual and aural technologies will be perfected within the lifetime of anyone now in high school. On the most trivial level, it means Frank Sinatra and Aretha will sing new songs, songs they never heard of, long after their deaths; Marilyn Monroe and James Dean will be cast together (as they should have been in life) in new movies; Robert Bly and Maya Angelou will declaim poems they never composed. And no one will be able to tell the difference between the real and whatever is the opposite of real, now that "real" doesn't mean what it used to.

On another level, using digitalized photographs and some (illicit?) recordings of your voice, you and others can experience "you" doing and saying things that others can invent. In an experiential sense, there will be no proof of your existence -- that is, no proof that the "you" of these concoctions isn't *you*. Families being what they are, marriages being what they are, relationships being what they are, imagine the "home

movies." Your loved ones (and your enemies) will be able to re-create you even after you're stone dead. These inventions will seem to inhabit the name of your name.

There is no Zeus to fasten these inventors upon a stone, no vulture to eat their livers -- and if there were, some (digital) Hercules or Xena would free them. But they and their ilk are giving to humanity fire and arts undreamed of. Still, let's admit that there's nothing in all this that wasn't implicit in the first sculpture carved by whomever first carved it. Painting. Photography. Recordings. Their purpose was to preserve identity -- but in fact they extended and changed the nature of it. And now this.

I do not write this in appalled protest, nor in shock, still less in dismay. When lightning strikes, I do not ask, "Why did God make lightning?" What is, is. To know its reason is not my privilege. There was a tornado watch on Staten Island, of all places, and my brother Aldo's roommate said, "Should we pray to God to protect us from the tornado?" Al said, "The guy you're praying to is the same guy who sent the tornado."

But I wonder ... what will we do when we, ourselves, are no longer the irreducible proofs of our existence? What will I do when even the name of my name can be stolen?

My brother Salvatore once told me, "In order to survive my life, I have to be as outrageous as my life."

Sallie hit on something like my answer.

What I really think is that most people are mad, and will get madder still. The technological attack on identity is going to reduce a lot of people to blobs. But a lot of people are blobs already. I don't say that snidely or easily. What is, is. But these technologies make the issue stark:

There is nothing left but your allegiance to what you feel yourself to be. There is nothing left but your loyalty to your knowledge, even your loyalty to your ignorance, of what you are. There is nothing left but the look in your eyes. And your commitment to that look. And your willingness to look, committed, into the eyes of another. Who is, one hopes, equally committed. Technology is forcing the issue. You'll have to stand in who you are, because no one can do that for you, and no one can take that from you. And you'll have to endure a life without proofs. So you'd better love well, because that poet Ezra Pound was right: "What thou lovest well cannot be reft from thee."

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