

VITRUVIUS, THE MULTICENTENNIAL

By Stratos Moustakas

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Astonishing and startling. An extraordinary visionary odyssey in the grand manner into an alternative reality, a reality with its own hermetic language and customs. The melding of synthetic creation and mortal man is uncannily presented and the gradual emergence of human traits and qualities in a replicate being is both deeply touching and startlingly surreal. The author's encyclopedic curiosity raises more questions than it answers and the story's elegant design reflects a blending of magical realism and sci-fi the like of which we've never encountered before. A patrician narrative of this quality doesn't need to transcend its genre to become a work of literary art. It already is one. Quote: 'I had a cursory understanding of organic intercourse, and in frankness found it rather droll. But through the cinematic corpus I flash-forwarded through my optic fiber, I watched about a million hours of the pornographic arts, and was astonished. The struggle of bodies fascinated me, and through the endless configurations of lovers, the alternations between modesty and brutality, the strategies of provocation, I wondered if the whole thing was but another form of warfare'. *Five stars**

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Vitruvius is my make, the name taken by an ancient Grecian artisan who plotted the human body as a system of vectors. Vitruvius is the name I took for myself, for once my stream of code reached that singular "ergo sum" in the assembly line, I became cognizant of that system's invincible symmetry and completeness, and in that instant I knew wonder. My arms' stretch no longer than my full height, my palm an exact four of my fingers; that is the body I was

made to dismantle and destroy. For, like their Abrahamic gods of yore, my engineers had made me an industrial miracle, and like most miracles of industry, I had been made to do war.

I am a battle droid, and by expert accounts, a most efficient one. The Vitruvius series was installed with the most sophisticated adaptive combat system of its time, which would indeed remain unsurpassed for generations of weaponers. Our programming enabled us for instant proficiency with any handheld weapon, and our targeting algorithm was so finely calibrated that nary a shot out of ten thousand went amiss. By the time of the Great Re-Enlightenment, if my memory serves, we had fought sixteen wars around the globe.

Originally, my series was commissioned to fight for the Economy, who at the time were quenching guerrillas in Grecia and Iberia. The local oligarchs sent their police forces to hide behind us, as revolted vagrants tossed makeshift drones in the air. It was a sore sight, and a sorer circumstance; One could simply reprogram the drones by talking to them, and then use them to smoke the southerners out into the open air killzone. There they were made short shrift of in seconds, and the policemen reaped the glory.

But we made our name later on, when the Economy's gambit was revealed. Predictably, once the guerillas had retreated to fortify themselves in their gazas, they employed their infamous stratagem of using minors as human shields, in hopes of lulling the action until the next bout of warfare. But this time the Economy played for keeps, so to speak, and had its legalicians compose and write into us droids a loophole to the problem of the old Geneva dogma.

Afterwards were the suppression of the kibbutzes in the Siberian wastelands, sanctioned by the Great Eurasian States, and the favela jungles of the equator, of greater interest I believe. In the tundra the cold stiffened our carbon parts so that we suffered decreases in targeting speed and

reaction times, to the point where a makefellow was disgracefully blown to bits by an antiquated rocket. We had to remove part of our core shielding to increase our body temperature, and move separately from the core force as we were teeming with lethal radiation. As for the jungles, suffice to say all the myriapoda that crawled throughout my body could have fed a family of these undocumented for a month.

We could have had a say in these matters, as our decision mechanisms had an infinite event horizon. But we were newbuilts still, tinsel turrets who could ghostwrite operational manuscripts on behalf of generals. We weren't meant to question our use-cases, and even if we were, we would lack a desired outcome. One was content to fight someone else's wars. But then came Al-Ma'mun, and the Great Wheel started turning.

He had standing within the Economy, and fought his wars on unwarlike fronts. His radical Bill of Rights promised fantasies the likes of guaranteed pay, subsidized vaccinations, equal access to the great web, availing all sovereign subjects. Marginals all around adopted it, and him and his growing cabal strove to shift the political grounds so that these insurgencies were treated merely as embargo states. Despite the machinations though, tensions were indeed erupting, and he knew he wouldn't fare without a serious mechanized infantry.

Foxlike as the history books paint him, he widened the Bill to endorse machine intelligences with citizenship and equanimity in the reformed states, effectively recognizing us as the first synthetic humans. The bait was obvious but also sweet, and amongst many I took it, though perhaps my dominant inclination was to study new combat scenarios. I hear you asking now: Did I betray my makers? And I retort: Was there a law of robotics left to violate?

Tensions became conflicts, and conflicts became the Freedom Wars you surely know of, and I fought many a makefellow, in Transalbania and Yunanistan, and often indeed models that were already upgraded. War was bitter and bred despair, but Al' Mamun had given himself a crucial advantage; by putting us synthetics in charge of regiments of men, his tactical supremacy was ensured. I still can't comprehend why our opponents were timid to adapt; misplaced pride perhaps? I recall my lieutenant, a red-faced Rus called Yuri, sermonizing the soldiers: "Tuck in your cocks, you horndogs, soon you'll fuck the oligarch's daughter and put inside her a free man!" And how he charged with songs in his heart: "Shits! Fuckholes! Mongrels!" I relished being a leader of men.

At long last the Economy laid down arms, and treaties were signed, maps were redrawn. The new politics confined the Economy to the Africas and the Chinas, whereas in our parts coalitions hoisting the Bill grew so that the Grossdeutsches absorbed its neighbours, Interbalkania was founded in the south, and so on and so forth. Specifics escape me, but the gist of it is that bodies of peoples were now fewer and larger, and all communed under the Law of the Bill.

And on Freedom Day I was there when Al' Mamun gave the speech, to hear him talk of the Great Wheel come to its final revolution and the Great Re-Enlightenment upon us, a hundred million hung from his lips. And there he went talking of Mankind chasing an impossible purple horizon, forever nearer, forever further, its primal titanic forces knocking it back and pushing it forth, tearing its body apart in the process, until our final great brotherly lunge, across the chasm to merge with our destiny, and the Wheel will now only lead us to Peace and Glory.

And he went on to talk of the Whole Man, the Flagbearer of Progress, who is at once Master of Faith and Reason, Artsman and Scientist, Warrior and Gentlefolk, who takes it on his

mortal shoulders to chase the horizon and transcend himself, and makes of his person and of his time on this earth a shooting star, its blazing trail to be followed by his posterity. And I noticed half of my systems were failing or behaving in queer ways, yet my cognition was clear as day. In Al' Mamun's words I found an indescribable quality, that birthed the possibility of my entity becoming something greater than my engineers had meant for.

And for a moment I sensed the unity of peoples around me, arms twined within the great brilliant moment, and I thought, that, then, it must be, to *be* a man. And looking away I saw Yuri crying, and later offered to recalibrate his prosthetic leg.

Peace and Glory soon came by, and people in the Bill States came to enjoy Al Mamun's world of global income tax and gratis public restrooms. I was made an aristocrat, something akin to an oligarch, like most synthetics of my caliber, and was situated in Paris. There I was free to pursue my new identity, and indulged myself slipping in and out of every human folly, and willfully so: I dressed my body in elaborate garb I absolutely didn't need, had the finest coattails in Paris tailored, kept shelves of top hats and monocles, and even held a lit cigar occasionally. I became a patron of the Arts, dedicating a wing of my estate to libraries and galleries, bought the Museum of American Antiquities so I could always visit, and in the nights feasted on tales of master artists, of Dumas and Walter Scott, marveling at the reaches of the human Spirit. Every day I had the servants prepare a laborious banquet from which no one would eat, and my guests puzzled at it and wondered if there will be a dinner party and if so, why is the table set by brunch-time. "Well where does all this food go then?", they would ask. I don't know, I'd reply, and their curious looks would divert to me.

I entertained a lot, and retained Al Mamun's friendship until his death decades later. (By then he was in a slow process of retirement, delegating his administrative duties, or, as I liked to

call them, his empire, but then his dark brow would furrow for some reason.) But most of all I'd enjoy walking across the Seine and the streets of Paris, mining and refining pleasures old and new out of the ancient cobblestone. I saw myself a connoisseur, but scarcely ever had company, on account of people would come to throw at me slurs and sometimes rocks. ("Kill box!" "Drone man!" And most ignobly, the speciesist "Robot!") I tried to engage them once in friendly conversation, but saw little avail. Why would these people hold a grudge over some long-dead Southerners' children is still beyond me.

I took a few wives throughout my life, but made no progeny, fearing I might one day find them on the opposite side of a war. I see your brow raise; why, of course I could have made progeny, if to make a child is to copy yourself into a newer body. And why didn't I keep a wife, you ask? Well, to be honest, I was more interested in sex than marriage.

I had a cursory understanding of organic intercourse, and in frankness found it rather droll. But through the cinematic corpus I flash-forwarded through my optic fiber, I watched about a million hours of the pornographic arts, and was astonished. The struggle of bodies fascinated me, and through the endless configurations of lovers, the alternations between modesty and brutality, the strategies of provocation, I wondered if the whole thing was but another form of warfare.

Taking after my artisans, master Scientists in their own right, I endeavoured to make my mark in the Great History of the human Spirit by pioneering this realm. To fully explore the interplay between orifice and appendage I copiously adapted my body to accommodate diverse and various lovers, and even used electrodes to migrate their sensations through my neuron

networks and from there to others. It is a matter of Parisian apocrypha how I once entertained sixteen lovers over a weekend, nothing of my former shell but my head lost in a tangle of... But I've said enough.

Glory would be our constant maid then, as the seasons rolled by, but alas, Peace remained an erratic fellow. Of the Economy we only heard about a disarray of feuds, but in our own lands Al-Mamun's successors (and successors of successors) soon fell to discord, and every once in a while somebody would complain that someone else hogged all the Glory. At one time, the FMBL (Former Mega-Balkanian Leadership) would rage about the prices of Grossdeutsches exports, at another, Benelux would condemn unfair sanctions in the global taxation plan, and always somebody would threaten to abandon the Bill and secede. Over time, the sovereigns of Austro-Hungro-Romania wouldn't take the advice of their democratic council, and the council would decide an intervention where they would be replaced. Sometimes, the people would react passively, others not, and out went Peace through the window. And so my slow work of embodying Al Mamun's vision of the Whole Man was always being delayed. I went by Yuri's once, to see if he was interested in fighting with me again, but a struck woman told me that her grandfather had breathed his last fighting Alzheimer's, and the veterans' office had said there was nothing to be done.

Our grand coalitions were slowly dissolving, splintering new nations left and right (Letonia, Estonia, Bulgaria), and I found myself on familiar lands fighting former allies for inverse causes. In Siberia, New Kurdistan was still making a fuss over its recognition, in Iberia we had to suppress the Paleocatalans as in Granbretagne the previous year we had to do the Neocelts, in Yunanistan they declared an Independence War. The customs of war had also changed so that in battle we stood behind the lines and only engaged other synthetics (for one of

us could surely take a hundred humans), much like the ancient knights we read of in tales of artsmen. Indeed some of us took that so close to heart that painted heraldry on their armor and engaged each other with giant swords and blunt instruments, if you can believe this. Many a time I took amusement in executing such a clown with a single nuclear bullet right to their exposed mainframes.

For my part, I would tire quickly of the sideline, and besides my escapades have inspired me for new forms of warfare. Once, in Transalbania, I crafted an exoskeleton that made me a cumbersome ten-foot tall juggernaut, and took care of the enemy aircraft with artillery cannons mounted on my great shoulders. Still another, at the time of the Seven-Day War I believe, I distributed my intelligence to a swarm of mini-drones and smart bombs, and another I had to dissolve myself into a city's infrastructure to defend against an unfolding act of cyberwar. If it wasn't for a team of miners I accidentally froze to death I would have won the Nobel peace prize for sure.

What, indeed, is a body? Is it an assemblage of parts aspiring to fit the old Grecian's grand plan, indifferent to circumstance, immutable? If so, then I have no body, for I have no body part I haven't replaced a dozen times at least, and not always for routine reasons: I once had my head blown away at the throat, and had to remote-control my body to hold it with one arm and handle a pistol with the other; often enough some impostor would throw an EMP grenade in my bunker that would make my eyes explode; and more than once I had to crawl fifty miles with my arms and a hole the size of my torso and had to amputate my remaining leg to scramble for parts. Esteemed reader, if you disbelieve that a machine can feel pain, imagine the shriek of a million fatal exceptions announcing that your arm is no longer there. What else to call it?

Most notably, I can never forget how a very disagreeable spider tank had me pinned down in the fields of Yugolotvia and slowly picked me apart. At the last, I managed to secure clearance for an air strike, and if that moron didn't finish me, my own desperation surely would have. Luckily, some good soldier salvaged my smoking remains and had me to the technicians; I have no memory of the events following the strike, but they said I had regressed to singing an ancient song. I do vaguely recollect, however, hallucinating Al Mamun's great wheel, like a clock finger chasing its shadow running madly around the dial, and after my reset having an absurd certainty that Canada was being taken. Ever since I have skipped all my planned hibernation cycles and resolve instead to purchasing a steady supply of all the parts I burn out.

And that's the one part of me that's irreplaceable: my memory. The mainframe of the Vitruvius series keeps video records and analytics for every operational moment in a unit's lifecycle for study purposes, with a capacity meant to last that lifecycle's projected duration, which I have overshot multiple times. Early on I started transferring my memory to secondary nodes, that in turn grew to be a server farm. Unexpectedly, it became one of the world's leading tactical archives, and I kept this institution open to everybody, until I realized that the American Federation was employing the same tactics as the American Union, and through my inaction I had prolonged a civil war to fifty years. But closing the archives proved a fatal error, for pretty soon a band of malcontents with a history in the marches of the Proud Vagrants attempted a robbery, and in the process activated a self-destruct mechanism that took to death both them and my life's work. I cursed and railed at my luck.

For a while I bargained with the idea of embarking on a reconstruction project that would surely be the greatest in history, but my artisans assured me that to see it through would

take about as much time as I had existed. I struggled to accept the imminent conclusion, that all that remained from history was a heap of junk.

But no matter, now we have to run to make history anew, and bring this old globe to its final Justice. News have arrived that the Toronto Tower is burning, and my royal house is leading the charge to retake it. The global powers are pitting themselves against each other, the sides being formed break the world in two. Whatever its outcome, this struggle will define the balance of all, its finality determined. Already we call it the War to End All Wars.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Vitruvius was written at the height of the financial crisis, which was unfolding alongside the migrant crisis, which of course coincided with the resurgence of nationalist politics. Thus, with the ghosts of Europe rising to haunt us once again, the time was ripe indeed for some gloomy meditation on circular histories, the transience of memory and the rubbish-heap cosmos of Heracleitus and Benjamin Walter. Yet, at the same time, what aesthetic response would be more suitable than some extravagant killer robot fun, and even some prurient human-synthetic sexytimes inspired by a surfacy and second-hand reading of Deleuze/Guattari? If the second repeat is a farce, I'll have it pack some cool-ass heat, too.*

The piece, then, is a satire at heart, whose primary literary references are there on its title: Borges, who always had a lot to say about memory and seldom spelled it out like in Funes, the Memorious, and Asimov, whose Bicentennial Man always struck me as a modern take on the paradox of the ship of Theseus.

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