

FRANKENSTEIN'S LECTURES

LEITURAS DE FRANKENSTEIN

Zaven Paré¹

Abstract: Frankenstein's creature is twice-made; firstly, Frankenstein is an organic being without any real biological parentage, and literary being through his own reading, which makes him aware of his intellectual and emotional affinities with humans. The trap closes around Frankenstein's creature, imprisoning him in the values he assimilates through reading, which inform him of the full scope of his monstrous identity. Nonetheless, it is important to underline that Mary Shelley never made the creature's readings insignificant, insubstantial or incomprehensible. On the contrary, they could be said to be ideologically, mythologically and symbolically edifying. *Frankenstein* is thus first and foremost the story of a monster who reads, and since it takes him a while to acquire language, learn to read and express himself orally, he only gradually begins to understand human nature. Mirroring his patchwork of a body, put together piecemeal, the monster begins to understand the world, an awareness that leaves him prey to the gravest doubts.

Keywords: Frankenstein; Mary Shelley; Lectures.

Resumo: A criatura de Frankenstein é fabricada duas vezes; em primeiro lugar, ele é um ser orgânico sem qualquer parentesco biológico e, em segundo, um ser tornado literário através de suas leituras, o que o faz consciente de suas afinidades intelectuais e emocionais com os humanos. A armadilha se fecha, aprisionando sua identidade monstruosa nos valores que ele assimila à medida que suas leituras avançam. No entanto, é importante sublinhar que Mary Shelley nunca fez as leituras da criatura insignificantes, insubstanciais ou incompreensíveis. Pelo contrário, elas poderiam ser ideológica, mitológica e simbolicamente edificantes. Frankenstein é, portanto, em primeiro lugar a história de um monstro que lê e que, como leva um tempo para adquirir a linguagem, aprender a ler e a se expressar oralmente, só gradualmente ele começa a entender a natureza humana. Espelhando seu corpo fragmentado, o monstro começa a entender o mundo, por meio de uma consciência que o deixa preso nas mais aterrorizantes dúvidas.

Palavras-chave: Frankenstein; Mary Shelley; leitor.

¹ Professor da Escola Superior de Desenho Industrial (ESDI) Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ): <zavenpare@gmail.com>.

MARY SHELLEY'S CREATURE

In literature, Frankenstein's creature can be seen as the common ground for representing the automaton's mask. The laws of physiology, or even of chemistry and electricity, contributed significantly to his creation. Although they are partially disclosed in the book, they fail to fully explain his advent. We should note that right from the start the invention of Frankenstein, as regards organicity and language, corresponds more closely to the designation of creature than monster. On the other hand, since electricity is his vital principle, this choice exposes him directly to the problem of how machines operate.

Boris Karloff has created the definitive cinematographic archetype of this mask on the borderline between the human and the artificial. In *Man, Play and Games*, Roger Caillois describes the power of using a mask: "He temporarily reincarnates mimics and identifies with these frightful powers and soon, maddened and delirious, really believes that he is the god as whom he disguised himself, cleverly or crudely, in the beginning" (CAILLOIS, 2001, p. 87). Created in perilous and unsuitable conditions, Frankenstein is a pale imitation of a human being. With his negative representation and the idea that he loses control, the creature is a Faustian interpretation of an artificial being. In Frankenstein's words: "I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs" (SHELLEY, 1993, p. 45). This creature is not so different from the metaphysical handcrafted figure of Pinocchio, despite the positive dimension attributed by Carlo Collodi (1995, p. 16): "The eyes being finished imagine his astonishment when he perceived that they moved and looked fixedly at him".

The novel *Frankenstein* is framed by the story of a polar exploratory expedition led by Robert Walton, the captain of the boat which rescues Victor Frankenstein from an iceberg. Like the explorer, Doctor Frankenstein is in search of the absolute, like the elusive *country of eternal light* (SHELLEY, 1993, p. 13) mentioned by the captain. Mary Shelley uses a *mise en abyme* to give an account of the creature's existence through Victor Frankenstein's words as he tells Robert Walton about his life. However, the reader soon forgets that the novel is primarily the tragic story of a creature born as a peaceful being and abandoned at birth. Since the story is told through the letters Walton writes to his sister, by definition the narration is in the first person. A novel of this kind could not be narrated in the third person. Hidden between two stones in his cabin, the creature's memoirs

could seem improbable, since even though Victor Frankenstein gave his creature a brain and Mary Shelley cast him with the ability to speak, the creature was not endowed with enough power to write and keep a journal or correspondence.

Mary Shelley creates a narrative distance that places Victor Frankenstein's tale between an absolute past, still present in his memory, and the eternity of myth. This is no doubt why the author chose to eliminate all the characters from her novel. Not only would the monster take revenge on humans, in general, he would also, and especially, seek vengeance against his creator and indirectly his author, in particular. Elisabeth Lavenza thus seems to owe her existence uniquely to the pretext of providing the creature with the possibility of a dual revenge, since she is both Victor Frankenstein's fiancée and Mary Shelley's mirror.

She busied herself with following the aerial creation of the poets; and in the majestic and wondrous scenes which surrounded our Swiss home – the sublime shapes of the mountains, the changes of the seasons, tempest and calm, the silence of winter, and the life and turbulence of our Alpine summers (SHELLEY, 1993, p. 29).

The reference to poets inevitably turns our thoughts to Percy Shelley and Byron, the two passions of the 19-year-old Mary Shelley's life. The sublime landscapes refer to the Alps encircling Villa Diodati, where the three of them stayed on the banks of Lake Geneva. The journal (SHELLEY, 1987, pp. 85-135) she began the month before starting *Frankenstein* featured the same descriptions of mountains using fairly similar terms to those in the novel: descriptions of Switzerland, the mountains with their passes and valleys, in Vaud near Lausanne, in Savoy, in Bonneville, Cluse and Chamonix, and excursions to see Mont Salève and Mont Blanc. On 24 July 1816, the day after she first mentions that she has started writing *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley visited Montanvert to admire the magnificent Sea of Ice (SHELLEY, 1987, pp. 117-118). The landscape provided the setting for the dramatic confrontation between Victor and his creature. But the descriptions of the emotions roused by the scenery quickly start to dwindle, as presumably her focus shifted to writing the book. The document becomes a collection of lists, detailing the books Mary Shelley read from 1815 to 1820 (SHELLEY, 1987, lists, pp. 85-103), year by year, followed by the regular logging of her daily reading accompanied by short annotations on the works her companions, Percy Shelley and Byron, were reading too.

THE CREATURE'S READING MATTER

In the preface to the 1818 edition, Percy Shelley wrote that in June 1816 they spent their evenings huddled around a fire in the company of Byron and Doctor Polidori,² entertaining themselves by reading *Fantasmagoriana* or *Anthology of Stories of Apparitions of Spectres, Revenants, Phantoms, etc.*³ These stories, which had fallen into their hands by chance, aroused in them the desire to imitate the form, and they each applied themselves to writing a tale based on supernatural or terrifying elements. Although Mary Shelley's invention is certainly supernatural, and the figure of her creature does indeed resemble a ghost, the creature surely cannot be contemplated without arousing terror. The desire to terrorize can be considered from two angles, from the standpoint of the creator and from that of the creature; in other words, the two characters are each the victim of the other.

Frankenstein's creature does not have the power of speech until chapter X, during the reunion on the Sea of Ice. He starts by explaining how he learned to speak by spying on the De Lacey family and listening to Felix De Lacey reading: "I since found that he read aloud, but at that time I knew nothing of the science of words or letters" (SHELLEY, 1993, p. 85). While learning to talk, the creature studies grammar as taught by Safie, the young foreigner who had been taken in by the family. These lessons open new fields of knowledge to the creature and provide him with a double source of delight. "My days were spent in close attention, which I might more speedily master the language" (p. 92). Volney's *Ruins of Empires* becomes the object of the daily reading, accompanied by explanations of the text. Felix read the book out loud in declamatory style, seeking to exalt the text with the tones of his voice. This spoken narration gives the creature his first general knowledge of history and an overview of the different nations of the earth. He discovers manners, governments, religions, ancient cultures, chivalry and Christianity. The creature undergoes a gradual awakening, which leads him as far as identifying with the American Indian *noble savages* for whom he feels compassion. "Was man, indeed, at once so powerful,

² Writer (1795-1821) associated with the Romantic Movement considered as the creator of the vampire genre, and Byron's personal doctor.

³ Translated from German to French by Jean-Baptiste Benoît Eyriès (1767-1846). *Histoires au nombre de sept*, published in 1812.

so virtuous and magnificent, yet so vicious and base? He appeared at one time a mere scion of the evil principle and at another as all that can be conceived of noble and godlike” (SHELLEY, 1993, p. 92). The complexity of his feelings towards human nature, towards being “a great and virtuous man” and his discovery of the law that governs society – the division of property, inequalities and injustices, the question of lineage – lead him to reflect on his own condition. Both his diligence in learning words so that he could reproduce and understand them and his appropriation of a certain representation of the world and of language gradually become instruments he can use to contemplate himself. His acquisition of language initially seems to compensate for his deformities, caused by the parody of bodily reconstruction performed by Victor Frankenstein. When the creature listens to Felix reading Volney to Safie, the reader participates in this improbable attempt to put the pieces of a still unfinished creature together. However, the reader is aware that is the creature is an uncritical listener with a confused *curriculum* and, most importantly, the inability to read. The acquisition of language, which seems to offer him a reassuring context for rebuilding himself from the inside, transforms him when he starts to read. The creature thus tells Victor how he came across a cache of books lying on the path in the woods:

I found on the ground a leather portmanteau containing several articles of dress and some books. I eagerly seized the prize and returned with it to my hovel. Fortunately the books were written in the language, the elements of which I had acquired at the cottage; they consisted of Paradise Lost, a volume of Plutarch's Lives, and the Sorrows of Werter. The possession of these treasures gave me extreme delight; I now continually studied and exercised my mind upon these histories (SHELLEY, 1993, p. 98).

His fortuitous discovery of the books calls to mind the archetypal conversion narratives of Saint Augustine and Saint Paul. Augustine's conversion is due to a book – when the Bible opens in front of him and he hears a voice telling him to pick it up and read it – followed by physical manifestations. Accounts of the emotional and sensory manifestations the converted person experiences during the conversion process are the *topoi* of biographical genres, such as spiritual biographies (MARIN, [s.d.]).

Suddenly, thanks to these books, the creature has established a cognitive relationship to the world. He switches from pleasure in reading to wonderment then the ecstasy of possessing books that in turn produce an infinity of new images and new emotions. But the three books leave

the creature in a state of profound depression and bowed down under a feeling of terror he cannot really express until the end of the book. The creature's education is at the heart of the novel's narrative construction. By discovering the books, by learning how to read, by gradually becoming literate as he reads the three works, Frankenstein's creature finally begins to express himself, giving voice to his body's sensations and the feelings in his soul, as well as commenting on the events of the world. Since he was born on the dissection table at a university, a library would conceivably have been the setting for this encounter. Nevertheless, the lucky discovery of the books lost in the woods transforms them into agents, and the particular choice of those three works becomes a trap, both for the creature and the reader. Books and reading are effectively fictionalized as they shift from their initial place in the pages of Mary Shelley's journal to the novel, where they become entrenched.

The fictionalization of books and reading thus raises the question of their introduction in the nineteenth-century novel: "Can it thwart the realistic intent with self-reference? Or does it serve to remultiply the reference's dimensions?" (GLEIZE, 1992, p. 8). In the case of *Frankenstein*, the three books cited are material objects and the creature's reading is an individual practice spurred by his listening to Felix's reading aloud. This representation leads us to consider both the internal constraints heralding a strategy for preparing a trap that is consistent with the tale (fictional conditions: the forest, the path, the case, the type of books found) and the external socio-historical constraints pertaining to reading practices in which the author places an illiterate creature. Victor Frankenstein's creature is as much the product of a distorted piecing together of human anatomical parts with life breathed into them, as he is the product of a piecing together of texts that construct his thinking to the point where they legitimise the awareness he ultimately attains. The creature is deeply convinced that he does not have the right to exist in a world that is not ready to accept him.

THE RUIN OF EMPIRES AND PLUTARCH'S LIVES

Volney is seen as one of the precursors of twentieth-century ethnology, anthropology and sociology. *Ruins of Empires* was Percy Shelley's favourite book. In 1791, the *Moniteur* advertised the publication of the work under the title *Ruins or Meditation on the Revolutions of Empires, a work liable to arouse curiosity*. Volney uses the device of an apparition to comment

on contemporary events. He places himself in the setting of the ruins of Palmyra and meditates on the destruction of empires whose power seemed eternal. He notes that they are not exempt from the laws of nature and their decree that everything must perish. This first narrative is an exercise in listening for the creature, but also an exercise in self-examination. A sort of transposition of similarities and analogies takes place, which he sets side by side with his short experience of observing society. Although the creature cannot further explore the elements for deliberation the book suggests, it raises a number of metaphysical questions that remain unanswered until the end of the novel.

Plutarch's *Lives*, one of the three books he finds, continues along the same path as Volney's *Ruins of Empires*, adding further to the creature's burgeoning *curriculum*. By allowing her creature to read Plutarch, Mary Shelley opens up his horizons to politics. She could be said to have created a sort of genealogy of specific work necessary to educate a creature of this kind. Mary Shelley sees the writer's task as engaging with the programmatic project of making history – history as “the school of life” in the sense attributed by Cicero in *Magistra vitae*:

History in the Ciceronian sense is the witness of eras, the light of truth, the school of life.⁴ The mind of humans, too slow in the progress it makes, needs a reliable and enlightened guide who will speed up its unhurried course. History fulfils this important function for humans: history takes them by the hand, so to speak, when they are still in their infancy and guides their every step, imparting advice to guard against the transgressions caused by weakness and inexperience; history gathers and transmits from age to age this host of witnesses, the agreement between them producing conviction. The human mind has no difficulty in putting itself in the hands of an authority that subjugates it with enlightenment (RICARD, 1838, p. 6).⁵

When he is at the height of his introspection, the creature, since he has no laws to refer to, turns instead to history to bear witness and enlighten him. But this history of humankind, of thought and of life, cannot give him a place in society. It cannot reclassify him and extract him from his literary illusions and the world of pipe dreams and ward off credulity and madness.

In the same way as Adam in Milton's *Paradise Lost* or Goethe's *Werther*, Plutarch's *Lives* could be seen as a series of case studies. In

⁴ *Magistra vitae*, Dominique Ricard's translation of Cicero (Orat. Liv. II, Ch. IX).

⁵ Dominique Ricard (1741-1803) translated Plutarch's *Lives* from Greek to French (published between 1798 and 1803).

this context, Theseus, Romulus, Numa, Solon and Lycurgus are the characters upon whom he founds his experience. It is true that, given the brevity of his education, we can easily imagine his interpretation to inevitably be limited. Unable to go further than the impression of reading a series of biographies, almost like his own, these lives are singular and one of a kind. The creature does not seem to have access to the elements of erudition and conceptual thought required for analysing and defining literary genres, regardless of whether the texts studied are religious or historical works, collections of biographies or fiction. However, we can see that, conversely, Mary Shelley clearly considers these genres as part of a specific design. A certain pantheistic vision of the creature's reading matter within the author's vision reveals more than the mere construction of a character by means of the mirror provided by books; the books serve not only to legitimise but also to rebalance and compare the fabric of the novel. Based on the flesh, bodies, humans and the soul, Mary Shelley's fiction is juxtaposed with historical, religious and romantic narratives.

The volume of Plutarch's Lives which I possessed contained the histories of the first founders of the ancient republics. This book had a far different effect upon me from the Sorrows of Werther. [...] But Plutarch taught me high thoughts; he elevated me above the wretched sphere of my own reflections [...]. Many things I read surpassed my understanding and experience [...]. The cottage of my protectors had been the only school in which I had studied human nature, but this book developed new and mightier scenes of action (SHELLEY, 1993, p. 99).

By allowing him to name things, the creature's reading gradually produces in him new awareness of happiness and sadness. He does, however, regret that the texts favour certain characters over others, observing that the tendency is to focus on evil individuals rather than their more virtuous fellows.

I read of men concerned in public affairs, governing or massacring their species. I felt the greatest ardour for virtue rise within me, and abhorrence for vice, as far as I understood the signification of those terms, relative as they were, as I applied them, to pleasure and pain alone (SHELLEY, 1993, p. 99).

Plutarch, on the other hand, allows him to make a distinction between historical time and heroic times, between illustrious men and myths:

As geographers thrust into the extremities of their maps those countries that are unknown to them, remarking at the same time, that all beyond is hills of sand and haunts of wild beasts, frozen seas, marshes, and mountains

that are inaccessible to human courage or industry; so, in comparing the lives of illustrious men, when I have passed through those periods of time which may be described with probability, and where history may find firm footing in facts, I may say, my Senecio,* of the remoter ages, that all beyond is full of prodigy and fiction, the regions of poets and fabulists, wrapped in clouds, and unworthy of belief (PLUTARCH, 1831, p. 4).

In this introduction, Plutarch draws a topography of narrative. He situates history in space and time while banishing fiction beyond the known frontiers of geographers. It is in this space, beyond borders, that we thus encounter the principle underpinning *Frankenstein* and all its extremities: the unknown, ferocity, seas of ice and monsters.

Theseus resembles Romulus insofar as they are both of uncertain parentage (PLUTARCH, 1831, pp. 27-28), a condition the creature can initially identify with. However, the resemblance lies primarily in the description of the act that served to found Athens and then, more specifically, Rome, in other words, two cities, each founded on a crime. The act that introduces a historic precedent resonates with Victor Frankenstein's act, unprecedented in the history of literature. "As though a murder always preceded a murder. As though a foundation was not enough to really make a start. As though an origin asked for its origin" (SERRES, 1983, p. 19).

As for Numa, Solon and Lycurgus, they were lawmakers and thus able to give written form to the laws of their cities. Mary Shelley refers directly to her father William Godwin (1793), the author of *Political Justice*. "Induced by these feelings, I was of course led to admire peaceable lawgivers, Numa, Solon, and Lycurgus, in preference to Romulus and Theseus" (SHELLEY, 1993, p. 99). Plutarch (1831, pp. 56-58) drew a parallel between the lives of Numa and Lycurgus: "But the chief of their peculiar distinctions was Numa's accepting a crown and Lycurgus relinquishing one. The former received a kingdom without seeking it; the latter resigned one when he had it in his possession" (PLUTARCH, 1831, p. 56). In short, Plutarch offers up to the reader, well-informed or otherwise, a *corpus* of facts and accounts on the laying down of laws, and a vast document on ancient history and on the construction of human society and its institutions.

PARADISE LOST

Frankenstein's roots draw directly on historical cultural references and the creature's own experience. As the scope of the creature's reading

opens up, he views the world through the prism of his reading matter. For instance, his reading of Volney, an author hostile to religion, constructs a representation of a patriarchal god. His discovery of *Paradise Lost* and the description of the grand destinies tied up with the history of civilisation appears to be a quest for spirituality. The creature's second reading experience is the darkest part of the book. Given the deeper dimensions explored through his new reading experience, Mary Shelley links knowledge to the creature's psyche. This reference has the effect of elevating *Frankenstein's* status from story to myth (MCDONALD; SCHERF, 1999, p. 10).

But *Paradise Lost* excited different and far deeper emotions. I read it, as I had read the other volumes which had fallen into my hands, as a true history. It moved every feeling of wonder and awe that the picture of an omnipotent God warring with his creatures was capable of exciting. I often referred the several situations, as their similarity struck me, to my own. Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator (SHELLEY, 1993, p. 99).

The presence of *Paradise Lost* on the list of works read by *Frankenstein's* creature underscores the possibility of more than one reading of Milton.⁶ The creature interprets the myth as if it were a real story. One minute he identifies with Adam, a prototype, the next minute he feels manipulated by Victor, identifying himself as a plaything like the fallen angel. He has been thrown into existence like a new Adam, in search of meaning to give his life. However, the bewildered creature is torn between his feeling of innocence, his virtuous nature as a vegetarian *noble savage*, and his guilt as a vile and fiendish being.

The disobedience and rejection of his status as monster that *Frankenstein's* creature expresses mirror the act of transgression, as befits an origin myth. But the blade of the scalpel that separates flesh and the needle's thread that sews it back together are far more horrific than the teeth that bite into an apple:

Thence how I found
The new created world, which fame in Heaven
Long had foretold, a fabrick wonderful

⁶ Milton's poem was also the work most often cited by the author's mother Mary Wollstonecraft.

Of absolute perfection! There in Man
Placed in a Paradise, by our exile
Made happy: Him by fraud I have seduced
From his Creator; and, the more to increase
Your wonder, with an apple;
(MILTON, 1667, X, 491-528).

Satan's lucidity very often eludes Milton's intention, which is to justify God's ways to humankind. If these impenetrable ways "give an intelligent nature free will" (SAINT AUGUSTINE *apud* MILTON, 1667, t3; XXII, 1), as Milton points out, happiness for *Frankenstein's* creature is only possible by means of a real and loving relationship between the creature and his god-creator: "Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay To mould me Man?" (MILTON, 1667, X, 713-749). With his incredulous faith, he corroborates a conservative and authorised version of the rewriting of Genesis,⁷ drawing from it his own theory of human organs, in contrast to Victor Frankenstein who, just like William Godwin, suggests that reason is the very principle of life. *Paradise Lost* very clearly merges with the powers of nature and acts on the creature like an epiphany, not as a revelation of a world that reflects love, but of nature based on tyranny that decrees an iron perseverance: "Evil, be thou my good" (MILTON, 1667, IV, 106-143). It is only at the end of *Paradise Lost* that Adam discovers "That all this good of evil shall produce, and evil turn to good" (MILTON, 1667, XII, 431-472); justifying the free will of Nature and his creature's newfound freedom. *Frankenstein's* creature, just like Adam, were thus not created *ex-nihilo* since the spirit essentially contains matter.

THE PASSIONS OF YOUNG WERTHER

The epistolary novel was hugely popular in the late eighteenth century. This style of novel benefited from a wave of interest in reading real correspondence and added a greater realism to stories that corresponded to the reading public's new literary taste. In Germany, the genre reached a climax with Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*:

They produced in me an infinity of new images and feelings, that sometimes raised me to ecstasy, but more frequently sunk me into the lowest dejection. In *The Sorrows of Werther*, besides the interest of its simple and affecting story, so many opinions are canvassed and so many lights thrown upon what had

⁷ Isaiah: XLV, 9; also Romans: IX, 20-21.

hitherto been to me obscure subjects that I found in it a never-ending source of speculation and astonishment (SHELLEY, 1993, p. 98).

Mary Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, was described by her father as a *female Werther* due to her sensitive temperament, particularly in light of her suicide attempt following a long correspondence with her first lover who left her. Suicide and death,⁸ a recurring presence in Mary Shelley's life (GARRETT, 2002), especially when she was writing her novel,⁹ are no doubt reflected in the creature's tragic destiny. The creature's thoughts are in the constant grip of a relentless torment, his soul torn between the free will learned from the books and the fatality of corrupted nature.

The gentle and domestic manners it described, combined with lofty sentiments and feelings, which had for their object something out of self, accorded well with my experience among my protectors and with the wants which were forever alive in my own bosom. But I thought Werther himself a more divine being than I had ever beheld or imagined; his character contained no pretension, but it sank deep. The disquisitions upon death and suicide were calculated to fill me with wonder. I did not pretend to enter into the merits of the case, yet I inclined towards the opinions of the hero, whose extinction I wept, without precisely understanding it (SHELLEY, 1993, pp. 98-99).

This idea increasingly takes root from one book to the next. As we read *Werther* through the eyes of an "illiterate monster", the work conjures up a far more deep-reaching image and idea of the strategic issues that arise from the mechanism of introducing a character who reads into a novel. The rare books that Goethe puts in the hand of Werther, for example, are alternately mirrors and instruments of empowerment, works of loneliness, intimacy and the heart. Werther says he tolerates them as remedies, in other words, that intertextual relationships that effect a fresh *mise en abyme* must not be suspected of weakening the novel's representation:

I like those authors best whose scenes describe my own situation in life, – and the friends who are about me, whose stories touch me with interest, from resembling my own homely existence, – which, without being absolutely paradise, is, on the whole, a source of indescribable happiness (GOETHE, 1995, p. 16).

8 The death of her mother during childbirth and of her children at a young age.

9 Suicide of Mary's half-sister then Percy Shelley's ex-wife.

The book serves at times to guide our reason, at others to excite our passions, and accompanies or leads the reader astray. In the words of Werther or according to the creature's impressions, do books guide our imagination and arouse our observations? Or is it the other way around?

"I have no longer any feeling for the beauties of nature, and books are distasteful to me." (GOETHE, 1995, p. 35) Werther writes in his letter dated 22 August. The creature questions his feelings and his doubts regarding his desires, since, more than anything else, *Werther* tells him about passion, and how a deep-reaching passion can lead a troubled being to a tragic end. When life outside books, guided by an excessive focus on feelings, when this life has lost all meaning, with no hope of finding fulfilment with a soulmate, then death becomes the only solution. Reason gains the upper hand over the folly of the absurd, and the decision of suicide vanquishes the corruption of Nature.

VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN'S JOURNAL

Reading produces a reassuring context for the creature but opens the door to a second kind of deformity. Mythology or ideology constructed on this selection of books is assimilated unquestionably, and ends up destroying him, since he accepts them as a truth. According to Mary Shelley, Victor Frankenstein is a veritable *Prometheus* and his creature a *modern golem* and not a new version of the *noble savage*. His book-based education contributes both to forming and to deforming him, far from the perfectible being described by Rousseau, since he exists in the book and by means of the book, and not outside the book without the act of reading.

The creature soon discovers another form of writing: the pages of Victor Frankenstein's journal, which he can now decipher and which he brings up when in his creator's presence and questioning him:

I discovered some papers in the pocket of the dress which I had taken from your laboratory. At first I had neglected them, but now that I was able to decipher the characters in which they were written, I began to study them with diligence. It was your journal of the four months that preceded my creation. You minutely described in these papers every step you took in the progress of your work. [...] the minutest description of my odious and loathsome person is given, in language which painted your own horrors and rendered mine indelible (SHELLEY, 1993, p. 100).

Reading thus only exists as a form of truth, a truth described, an accusatory truth, a terrible truth made indelible by being written down, like the Holy Scriptures that Milton draws on or the sorrows and torments of Goethe himself.

VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN'S READING MATTER

As part of the ambitious endeavour that is *Frankenstein*, the works cited in the text sometimes conflict with other, invisible, works: those read by Victor and those read by Mary Shelley in general. Indeed, Victor's reading matter is mentioned, or at least scrupulously annotated in Mary Shelley's journal.

Mary Shelley does not stop at pure reason, the mainspring of her father's thinking. Influenced by her reading of Lucretius, Pliny and Buffon¹⁰ as well as Erasmus, Darwin and, in particular, Davy,¹¹ she postulates scientific reason. William Godwin and Erasmus Darwin were both great admirers of Benjamin Franklin, whom they saw as *a new Prometheus*.¹² Their admiration encouraged Mary Shelley to explore all sorts of scientific avenues useful to developing her project and the pseudo-scientific and fairly unorthodox techniques employed by her character, Doctor Victor Frankenstein. It would be difficult to say that Mary Shelley, just like her character, are not in step with their times, from both a philosophical and scientific point of view. The fact remains that she was at the heart of a great many ideas that swirled around her, right up to the evening when she began to write her novel:

Before this I was not unacquainted with the more obvious laws of electricity. On this occasion a man of great research in natural philosophy was with us, and excited by this catastrophe, he entered on the explanation of a theory

¹⁰ Titus Lucretius Carus, *De natura*, Caius Plinius Secundus (23-79), *Historia naturalis*, and Buffon, *Théorie de la terre* included in the first volume of *Histoire naturelle générale et particulière*, are mentioned in the list of texts read in 1816 and 1817 that appeared in Mary Shelley's journal, p. 97 and p. 100.

¹¹ Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802), doctor and poet, was friends with William Godwin, Charles Darwin's grandfather and author of *The Temple of Nature; or, The Origin of Society* (1803) and *Zoonomia; or, The Laws of Organic Life* (1794), a work that had a particularly strong influence on his grandson and Percy Shelley. Humphry Davy (1778-1829) was an English physicist and chemist. See D. L. Mc Donald and Kathleen Scherf (1999, pp. 20-22 and pp. 22-24).

¹² On the origin of the name Frankenstein, see Mc Donald and Scherf (1999, pp. 20-22 and Appendix B: The Education of Victor Frankenstein: Darwin and Davy).

which he had formed on the subject of electricity and galvanism, which was at once new and astonishing to me. All that he said threw greatly into the shade Cornelius Agrippa, Albertus Magnus, and Paracelsus, the lords of my imagination; but by some fatality the overthrow of these men disinclined me to pursue my accustomed studies (SHELLEY, 1993, p. 33).

As early as the second page of *Frankenstein*, Walton refers to electromagnetic forces: “I may there discover the wondrous power which attracts the needle” (SHELLEY, 1993, p. 13).¹³

MARY SHELLEY’S READING MATTER

Just as Mary Shelley confronts her creature with books, she also punctuates her work with strategically placed names of writers from a circle that gradually widens around him, encompassing Goethe, Milton and Plutarch. The conception of her character seems to drawn on and be fortified by this process, to the extent of incarnating an objective, and even contradictory, form of certain Enlightenment ideas, such as, for example, those propounded by Holbach¹⁴ and Rousseau.¹⁵ For Mary Shelley, Frankenstein’s creature, in the form of a monster, is also the pretext for a vast exploration of her intellectual education and cultural references. The creature serves as a lever for her, a tool to allow her to think as a writer, without forgetting the influence of her background, as the daughter of two intellectually brilliant free thinkers and the wife of a leading Romantic poet. In the introduction to her 1835 edition, Mary Shelley writes that her parents are two illustrious writers: William Godwin is a philosopher, and considered to be one of the fathers of anarchism, while Mary Wollstonecraft is a writer and seen as one of the founders of feminism. It is difficult not to notice how Mary Shelley’s life and work are at the crossroads of all sorts of burgeoning socio-cultural movements, both intellectual and political (anarchism and feminism), scientific (electricity,

¹³ Cf. Erasmus Darwin’s speculations on electromagnetism in *The Economy of Vegetation* (2010) or later references to steam power.

¹⁴ Holbach, *Système de la nature ou des lois du monde physique et moral* (1770), in *The Journals of Mary Shelley* (SHELLEY, 1987, list for 1815, p. 90).

¹⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau (2009), *Émilie*. Cf. List for Mary Shelley’s journal 1815 (SHELLEY, 1987, p. 89), then a further reference to *Émile*: probably a book discussing the questions raised in *L’illustration des maximes et des principes de l’éducation*, then in *Remarques sur le système d’éducation*, *Les Lettres sur le christianisme*, and *Lettre à Christophe de Beaumont condamnant l’Émile* (1763); *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, cf. List for 1815 (SHELLEY, 1987, p. 92); and *Confessions et Lettres*, cf. List for 1817 (SHELLEY, 1987, p. 101).

for example) and literary (Romanticism). *Frankenstein* is dedicated to her father, the author of *Caleb Williams*. His more radical texts can clearly be seen in the pages of Plutarch read by the creature. But she also read the rest of his works, which all left their mark on *Frankenstein*.

Mary Shelley is thus impregnated with works by Godwin, Wollstonecraft and Rousseau, but she never “gives” them to her creature to read. The books she chooses are emblematic, or possibly even allegorical, like three universal works. Reading Rousseau would certainly have given the creature a positive vision of his role as a *noble savage*. However, Rousseau’s natural man is not a reader: “Rousseau, like Godwin, is present in *Frankenstein* not as a text the creature reads, but as a component of the creature himself, as Milton, Plutarch, Volney and Goethe also are” (MCWHIR, 1990, p. 78).

An exploration of the education of Frankenstein’s creature would be inadequate and simplistic if it reduced him to a sort of reflection of Rousseau’s *noble savage*. Neither would the artificial creature totally lacking a critical spirit be the perfectible being in the Godwinian sense. But the general reference to Rousseau is fairly clear and seemingly ironic, right from Victor’s first words: “I was born in Genevese” (SHELLEY, 1993, p. 26).¹⁶ Among other signs, we can observe a great many revised versions of situations described in *Emile*, including the character of Safie, the young Arab who marries Felix De Lacey in *Frankenstein*, who brings to mind Sophie, described as Emile’s perfect woman. It is interesting to note that in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Mary Shelley’s mother is harshly critical of Rousseau’s mistreatment of her (MCWHIR, 1990, p. 84). Moreover, Mary Shelley ensures that the full extent of the *Emile*-style impasse offered by a perfectible educational project shows through in her novel.

Reading a mere handful of books is not sufficient to construct an identity, and not recommended for the purpose; and in this case, the creature’s reading of the three books is not complete or accurate enough to give him a comprehensive awareness or representation of himself. According to Anne McWhir: “Either he reads the wrong books or, more probably, Mary Shelley (as author and teacher) denies him the ability to read them critically” (MCWHIR, 1990, p. 74). The intellectual challenge is just too great for the creature to tackle alone. At least, this is how

¹⁶ Mary Shelley refers to the passage: “I was born at Geneva, in 1712, son of Isaac Rousseau and Susannah Bernard, citizens” (ROUSSEAU, 2002, p. 2).

we perceive it from our position as a reader. It serves to stigmatise the creature as the essence of a man, in all the splendour of his physical and psychological incompleteness. Mary Shelley attempts to reinvent the *noble savage* so dear to Rousseau, making him radically artificial with the makings of a philosopher, although incapable of seeing himself outside of the representation provided by the books he reads. Instead of liberating him, reading ends up alienating him, forbidding him access to any rights and definitively banishing him to a place outside society. The influence of Enlightenment works produces the thought that necessity is the root of the *actions of humans*, just as it could be the foundation for *nature's movement*.

The creature initially assumes that his self-sufficiency is a sign of inferiority and sees the De Lacey family as a standard of perfection, and by modelling this uncorrupted family structure, he is reconciled to his condition during his stay in the hovel. But where is there to go when everything is so corrupt? What is the function of the human educated by nature in the middle of a tarnished institution?

Frankenstein's creature, just like Rousseau's Emile, manages to an extent to keep his distance by hiding away in the countryside, where standards and customs tend to be more stable. But when this Robison Crusoe-type experience comes to an end, when he reveals himself in the light of day to a greater number of people, educated and well-read, he realises to his great sorrow that he cannot forge a tie with the world due to his monstrosity. The image he sees in the mirror of society is that of his warped body and monstrous condition. He is thus condemned to wander endlessly in the quest for his creator, tormented and constantly wishing to question the man who made him, like Adam in *Paradise Lost*. The scene between the creature and the blind man demonstrates that education can only be considered as achieved when it is part of socialisation. Nevertheless, neither nature nor society can satisfy the creature once he has been educated; here, education serves only as a measure of the full extent of his exclusion. The creature, intrinsically bad due to the conditions and circumstances of his creation, can insist to his creator that he was born peaceful and fell victim to his abandonment and ill-treatment. But born naked, born a man and not a child, simultaneously deprived of the status of human, lacking a sense of morality, he was a being dispossessed right from the start as far as nature was concerned; this, at least, is Mary Shelley's view, in contrast to Rousseau's idea of

the *noble savage*. The creature can draw himself, walk, feed himself, gaze upon the moon with all the emotion of a primitive, be confused, worship, and he gradually learns to put names to objects. He is, however, equally distraught when faced with each of his discoveries and new-found knowledge. For when he discovers that naming things and acquiring language does not procure him the social ties he thirsts for, he laments the fact that his education is gradually taking away his right to happiness. He demands this right from his creator, believing that it will restore his virtue and give meaning to his life. However, he is forced to retain his role as a repressed being until the end of the novel. He merely survives, condemned to a sort of soaring self-pity, withdrawn from the world and turned in on himself, now confronting his creator, now asking himself questions on the patriarchal nature of the world. He is also faced with the aesthetics immanent in nature, the mountains, glaciers, forests and lakes, the elements of terror and beauty of the sublime that feature prominently in Romantic literature (FREDRICKS, 1996).

When he discovers the insubstantiality of the fragments that form him and understands the incomparability between Safie's theoretical benevolence and her disgust, this oppressive situation – along with other ones – makes the contradictions between what he has learned about ethics and the reality of society glaringly apparent. He is a monster, not a *noble savage*; or rather, he is a sort of distortion of the radically natural. *Frankenstein's* creature is a joke of a man, lacking the skills to be a prodigy, the only vestige of humanity lying in his dazed scepticism.

Once we have separated the creature's and Victor Frankenstein's reading matter, by concentrating rather on Mary Shelley's reading matter, we can see that there is a far more complex programmatic project at work than simply constructing a character by means of books. The creature survives as both prey and pretext for the creation of a more far-reaching project. The text of *Frankenstein* is more than the sum of the parts of readings and a panoply of ideas and influences: it confuses readers – those same readers who, like the creature, construct themselves by reading. However, unlike the reader, the creature gradually deconstructs himself; the structure he has built is shaken and weakened by the same books that brought him to life a second time.

By giving her creature these three books, Mary Shelley seems to be placing her novel outside the hierarchy of genres, diversifying as she does the types of reading and inventing a new type of reader: a monster. Two

examples illustrate Mary Shelley's sometimes critical view of the oppressive role of books. Firstly, the anticipated novel ending becomes a *tragic non-ending*, since Mary Shelley shows how novel endings are nothing more than a question of authoritarian manipulation. This is doubtlessly why she decided to abandon her character on an *ice raft*: the feeling of an unstoppable drifting brings pathos to the scene where the creature glides away into the distance towards an uncertain destiny. Secondly, the novel is based throughout on misunderstanding, on the unwillingness, on contempt; on this incompatibility between the altruism taught by the books the creature reads and the wounding revulsion he encounters, and on a distortion between reality and books.

FROM THE CREATURE TO OTHER CREATIONS

Mary Shelley's creature is doubly interesting: he has the sort of symbolic value that makes him into the usual archetype within the mythology of monsters; and he possesses a negative romantic power linked to the idea of loss of control right at the start of the novel, when he has convulsions.

In the mythic role, he introduces a genealogy of other artificial creatures into nineteenth-century gothic literature. Curiously, these creatures tend to follow in the footsteps of the abortive attempts to give *Frankenstein's* creature a fiancée. There are thus mainly feminine figures who take us in a straight line to the myths of Eve and Galatea. The story of this sculpture as told by Ovid (1992) inspired Prosper Mérimée's creation of his bronze statue in *La Vénus d'Ille* (1834). Mérimée wrote this tale in the style of Hoffmann's stories, popular throughout Europe at the time. In Hoffmann's short story, *The Sandman* (1829), Olympia is a wax figure, the first in a line of creatures made of increasingly malleable materials. In a similar vein, and in contrast to *The Modern Prometheus* pieced together from bits of dead bodies that recall archaic eras, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam proposes a *Future Eve* (1886) mainly made of rubber. She is also the fruit of a scientist destined to go down in posterity, a Thomas Edison reincarnated by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam in an imaginary Menlo Park.¹⁷ But whereas *Frankenstein's* creature disappeared on an *ice raft*, Edison's machine disappeared on a *steamer* on fire. Via literary affiliations and interposed materials, these andreids are a series of modern Galateas

¹⁷ Thomas Edison's New Jersey laboratory from 1876 to 1882.

described by a series of new Pygmalions, offering a play on figures and mask that is at odds with the *modern Prometheus* that sprung from Mary Shelley's imagination. The list of materials, organic or otherwise, used for the representations of these myths or the characters from the novels where they began are quite simply the inventories of (literary) production techniques. Materials and techniques are very much of interest in this exhaustive quest for imaginary representations of the artificial being.

Accordingly, as an assembly of fragments liable to lose control, these inventions, creatures or machines, are ultimately offered up to us as food for thought in their essential incompleteness and their condition as monsters.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AGRIPPA, Henri Corneille. *De occulta philosophia*. Paris: Berg International, 1982[1510].
- BUFFON, Georges-Louis. *Histoire et théorie de la terre. Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1. Paris: Hachette, 2014[1749].
- CAILLOIS, Roger. *Man, Play and Games*. Trans. Meyer Barash. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001[1958].
- CÍCERO. *De oratore*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2003.
- COLLODI, Carlo. *Pinocchio*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1995 [1883].
- DARWIN, Erasmus. *The Botanic Garden (Part 1, The Economy of Vegetation)*. Whitefish (MT): Kessinger Legacy Reprint, 2010[1791].
- EYRIES, Jean-Baptiste Benoît. *Fantasmagoriana, ou Recueil d'histoires d'apparitions, de spectres, revenants, fantômes, etc.*. La Fresnay Fayel: Otrante, 2015.
- FREUD, Sigmund. *L'inquiétante étrangeté*. Paris: Gallimard, 1988[1812].
- GARRETT, Martin. *Mary Shelley*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002[1919].
- GLEIZE, Joelle. *Le double miroir*. Paris: Hachette, 1992.
- GODWIN, William. *Enquête sur la justice politique et son influence sur la vertu et le bonheur en général*. Lyon: Atelier de Création Libertaire, 2005[1793].
- GODWIN, William. *Caleb Williams*. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2009[1794].
- GOETHE, Johann Wolfgang von. *The Sorrow of the Young Werther*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995 [1774].

- HOFFMANN, Ernst. *Contes fantastiques*. Paris: Flammarion, 1980[1817].
- HOLBACH, Paul-Henri. *Système de la nature ou des lois du monde physique et moral*. Paris: Coda, 2008[1780].
- LEVI-STRAUSS, Claude. *La voix des masques*. Genève: Skira, 1975.
- LUCRECE. *De rerum natura*. Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1997.
- MARIN, Louis. *Saint Augustin*. Patric Ranson (ed.). Les dossiers H. Paris: L'Age d'Homme, 1988, pp. 301-318.
- MCDONALD, David Lorne; SCHERF, Kathleen. Introduction to *Frankenstein*. Peterborough (Ont.): Broadview Press, 1999.
- MCWHIR, Ann. Teaching the Monster to Read. In: *The Educational Legacy of Romanticism*. Waterloo (Ont.): Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1990, pp. 73-92.
- MERIMEE, Prosper. *La vénus d'Ille*. Paris: Gallimard, 1999[1837].
- MILTON, John. *Le Paradise Lost*. Paris: Gallimard, 1995[1667].
- NANCY, Fredricks. On the Sublime and Beautiful in Shelley's *Frankenstein*. *Essays in Literature*, v. 23, n. 2, 1996, pp. 178-89.
- OVIDE. *Les métamorphoses*, Paris: Gallimard, 1992.
- PLUTARCH. Plutarch's Lives. Trans. Langhorne John and Langhorne William. Baltimore: William and Joseph Neal, 1831.
- POLIDORI, John William. *Le vampire*. Paris: Babel, 1996[1819].
- RICARD, Dominique. Preface. In: PLUTARQUE. *Les vies des hommes illustres de Plutarque*. Paris: Furne, 1838, pp. 1-54.
- ROUSSEAU, Jean-Jacques. *Confessions I*. Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 2002[1770].
- ROUSSEAU, Jean-Jacques. *L'Emile*. Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 2009[1762].
- SAINT AUGUSTIN. *La cité de Dieu*. Paris: Point, 2005.
- SERRES, Michel. *Rome le livre des fondations*. Paris: Grasset, 1983.
- SHELLEY, Mary. *Frankenstein*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1993[1818].
- SHELLEY, Mary. *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814-1844*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987[1815].

SHELLEY, Percy. *Queen Mab*, With Notes. London: General Historical Collection, 2011[1813].

SHELLEY, Percy. *The Revolt of Islam*. Paris: Gallimard, 2016.

VILLIERS DE L'ISLE-ADAM, Auguste. *L'Ève future*. Paris: Flammarion, 1992[1886].

VOLNEY, Constantin-François. *Les ruines, ou Méditations sur les révolutions des empires; et De la loi naturelle*. Paris: Hachette, 2013[1791].

Recebido: 6/07/2018

Aceito: 31/01/2019

Publicado: 28/06/2019