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Frankenstein: Mary Shelley´s Horror of Split Conscience

"O Horror! – Let me fly this dreadful monster of my own creation!"

This cry from H.M.Milner`s play *Frankenstein, or the Man and the Monster* (1862), truthfully expresses the atmosphere permeating the novel of Mary Shelley.

In my presentation I would like to discuss the central theme of the novel, which is the story of a monster.

This kind of character occupies an important position in the horror tales of all times. It is connected with the world of folklore, with the Classical and Judeo-Christian cultures as well as with the Celtic, Old English, and Old German literature.

J.A.Hadfield speaks about the "primitive emotions and feelings in the form of giants, heroes, serpents, and vampires". According to him, these feelings are "the representations of guilt, retribution, and fate; of lust and power, of monsters of the deep (the unconscious), and of unknown but overwhelming beings which fill our nights with nightmarish dreams" (Hadfield, J.A., as cited by Martin Tropp, *Mary Shelley`s Monster*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977, p.1).

The monstrous outcast, dwelling in the darkness and attacking the unprepared and unwary men, is as old as *Genesis*. Spending her youth in England and Scotland and indulging in literature from childhood, Mary Shelley may have known the Anglo-Saxon story of Grendel, a humanlike monster tormenting mankind, and some versions of the legends about other monstrous offsprings of Cain, about the evil spirits fighting against God. It is also possible that on her travels through Europe she heard the Middle European folk tale of Golem.

In Switzerland she could have seen the carnival and the traditional ritual during which someone dressed as the "wild man" (half-man, half-animal, supposed to inhabit the forests of Europe) appeared among villagers who persecuted him and "killed" him. Martin Tropp points out the similarity of this scene to the following episode in *Frankenstein*: "The whole village was roused, some fled, some attacked me, until, grievously, bruised by stones…I escaped to the open country" (*Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, Laurel-Leaf Printing, 1980, 107).

According to Drake Douglas, it is quite probable that during her journeys Mary Shelley came across the ruins of a 13th century castle near Frankfurt-on-Main and heard the Frankensteinian legend connected with its stones. It is a story of a knight who was buried in the tomb near the castle and who met his death in a battle with a fierce man-eating monster which resembled a boar and which, according to the legend, was man-made.

It was this ancient race of monsters from which the physical characteristics of Mary Shelley`s creature are derived. However, this figure seems to be even more horrible than the classic monsters were. It is a child of a grave, half-human, half-machine, a thing quite unnatural, standing somewhere between life and death.

The very moment of creation is recollected with awe: "Beautiful! – Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles… his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his

teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes…, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips".

Behold from a distance, it looks like a man but its stature exceeds that of a man and it moves with "superhuman speed".

The Monster has no name; it is called simply "the being", "the wretch", "the demon", "the fiend", "the abhored monster", "the wretched devil", "the horrid thing", "the filthy mass that moved and talked". The absence of a name moves this figure to a more abstract dimension and underscores the creature`s unerthliness. To have a name means to have a place in the ordered universe and to give a name to something is traditionally connected with acquiring control over it. The Monster`s namelessness suggests its alien nature as well as the human helplessness before it.

Fred Botting finds the Monster a figure which suggests the inarticulate, the blind, "la différence" in literature. He compares the interaction of Frankenstein and the Monster in Mary Shelley´s novel with the way Derrida interprets Dupin´s search for the missing document in Poe´s short story "The Purloined Letter". In his words, both the Monster and Poe´s unnoticed letter "function like a signifier, possessing its bearers as it blinds those who seek it out" (Botting, Fred, *Making Monstrous: ´Frankenstein´, Criticism, Theory*, Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 1991).

Frankenstein is a narrative within a narrative, with a number of intertextual allusions increasing the notion of doubleness as well as the feeling of uncertainty concerning possible meanings. In the words of Louis James, the narrative is "a palimpsest of subtext" ("Frankenstein´s Monster in two traditions", *´Frankenstein´, Creation and Monstrosity*, ed. Stephen Bann, London: 1994), including the Bible, the works by Aeschylus, Milton, Coleridge and Shakespeare. The intertextual nature of the novel is supported by Frankenstein´s reading Paracelsus, Cornelius Agrippa and Albertus Magnus, by the Monsters´s encounters with Plutarch or Goethe, and also by the novel´s subtitle ("A Modern Prometheus").

For the ancestry of the Monster the reader can go back to Milton. Mary Shelley had read *Paradise Lost* before she began to work on Frankenstein and the evidence of this reading can be found everywhere in her novel; in the motto as well as in the speeches of the Monster.

It is possible to say that Mary Shelley shares Milton`s understanding of a divine natural order. Taking over the idea of defining man`s place in the universe and of giving form to the forces which endanger him, she suggests the following question: what shall we do with our creations, especially when they refuse to fulfil the intention of the creator?

The story of the Monster resembles the fate of an abandoned child. (In this respect, Louis James points out the author´s "abandoned baby self" and her "abandoned babe"; "Frankenstein´s Monster in two traditions", *´Frankenstein´, Creation and Monstrosity*, ed. Stephen Bann, London: 1994). After the escape of its terrified maker, the creature spends its first days in the forest near Ingolstadt. Its suffering from alteration of light and dark, hot and cold has much in common with the pain of Milton`s demons punished by being made to feel the unbearable changes of fire into ice. The Monster attempts to acquire basic knowledge by trying to understand various sensations it experiences, it experiments with fire… This struggle for survival can evoke the image of a wild heathen life. Its fascination with moon and sun corresponds with the pagan adoration of the natural world. The Monster`s poetical expressions ("a gentle light", "the orb of night" – moon) can remind the reader of ancient Anglo-Saxon images (kennings) or, also, of the language of Shakespeare`s Caliban.

It is also possible to understand the troubles of the Monster` s lonely and uncivilized life as a polemic with Rousseau`s conception of the ideal conditions of life (this idea is discussed by Martin Tropp in *Mary Shelley`s Monster*).

The Monster`s encounter with the De Laceys, connected with its interest in literature (Milton), results in an interesting search for individual identity: "Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being…but he had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature…I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition, for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me".

Both desire for friendship and envy are awakened in the Monster, the world of the De Laceys has an attraction of inaccessible Paradise. The reader can be reminded of the torment of Satan, watching Adam and Eve, but also of the jealousy of Anglo-Saxon Grendel ("It was with pain that the powerful spirit/ Dwelling in darkness endured that time,/ Hearing daily the hall filled/ With loud amusement…" (*Beowulf*, transl by Michael Alexander, 86-89).

In accordance with Steinbeck`s interpretation of evil, drawing on the story of Cain and Abel ("The greatest terror a child can have is that he is not loved, and rejection is the hell he fears… And with rejection comes anger, and with anger some kind of crime …", *East of Eden*, 1952), the violent rejection the Monster experiences drives it to violence.

The sudden realization that "I, too, can create desolation" is the beginning of the Monster`s satanic career (the destruction of the De Laceys` cottage, the murder of Frankensteins`s brother William, the execution of an innocent servant). Watching Frankenstein`s destroying its promised mate, the Monster fulfils its promise "I shall be with you on your wedding-night" and, after finishing the life of Frankenstein`s best friend Clerval, it murders his bride Elizabeth. At the end it leads Frankenstein far to the vast expanses of the Arctic Sea where it kills him and departs to seek its own death. Reading its final lament over its crimes, we are again reminded of Milton`s Satan.

"He suffered…not the ten-thousandth portion of the anguish that was mine… (*F*, 218)
"…they little know
How dearly I abide that boast so vain
Under what torments I inwardly groan." (*Paradise Lost*, B.IV, 86-88)

As Martin Tropp suggests, the affinity with Satan complicates the evaluation of the Monster as an unambiguously evil figure. In Mary Shelley`s period Satan was admired as an unsubmissive rebel against injustice and privilege, a figure of resistance, reversal and revolution (especially in the work of Blake and Shelley).

Mary Shelley`s insight into the mind and the emotions of the Monster help us to understand this figure also as a human character. It is possible to read its story as a tale of prejudice and intolerance. Striking terror by its *appearance* and living in the world where any being must conform to the basic requirements to be accepted, the Monster is doomed to remain an outcast. It is monstrous because people cannot see it but monstrous. Or, better, because its ugliness becomes an ideal tool for projecting one`s hidden frustration and guilt onto it.

In the context of Shelley`s story, it is the guilt of Frankenstein: his desire for "unlimited powers" (*Frankenstein*, 46), his "unholy experiment" (Varnado, S.L., "The Idea of the Numinous in Gothic Literature", *Literature of the Occult*, New Jersey: 1981, 65), his "damnable career" (Porte, Joel, "Religious Terror in Gothic Fiction", in *The Gothic Imagination*, Washington State University Press, 1974, 45), his "pursuit of knowledge" which is "truly monstrous" (Jancovich, Mark, *Horror,* London: 1992, 27).

Throughout the whole story the Monster emphasizes the pain of exclusion and loneliness. Its speeches result in a pathetic wail of confusion and misunderstanding, aimed at the listeners` sympathy. The sympathetic approach to the Monster is reflected in P.B.Shelley`s review of the novel. According to him, there is in fact no monster in Frankenstein and the

creature`s crimes are not "the offsprings of any unaccountable propensity to evil, but flow irresistably from certain causes…They are the children of Necessity and Human Nature…In this the direct moral of the book consists…Treat a person wicked and he will become wicked" (*Mary Shelley`s Monster*, 50).

A deeply emotional defence of the Monster can be found in the study of Drake Douglas: "The tragedy of Frankenstein is not in the terror loosed upon the world, not in the innocent lives brought to the bloody destruction, not in the tragedy of the great House of Frankenstein; It is in the tragedy of the pitifully misunderstood Frankenstein`s Monster. And the tragedy of this creature is not so much that he was a monster, but that he was, withall, so much a man" (*Horrors!,* 1967,135).

According to Mark Jancovich, the Monster is "ugly and brutal, but sensitive and abused". It becomes "a monstrous figure but his monstrous actions are identified as a response to Frankenstein`s activities and actions" (*Horror*,1992, 27).

There is a problem of the soul, raising the unanswerable question about the Monster`s right to live and to find its place in the world of men. Would it be a murder to kill the Monster? Anyway, seeing the Monster as a human creature, the reader is ready to condemn the human treatment of it as cruel and even criminal.

In Mary Shelley´s novel, the fear of the other defines the outer (social) relationships as well as the inner experience of one´s self. The Monster`s shadowy appearances induce a dreamy mood and enable us to understand this figure as a kind of self-projection, as a double of Frankenstein. With its increasing self-awareness, the Monster drives Frankenstein to the inevitable self-destruction. Considering this relationship, Martin Tropp makes a comparison between the couples Frankenstein – the Monster and Miltons`s Lucifer – Satan. In his term, they play out "the Romantic drama of the mind, the myth of self-exploration" (*Mary Shelley`s Monster*, 62). Creating the Monster, Frankenstein in fact rises up against his own creator ("…like the archangel who aspired to omnipotence, I am chained in an eternal hell") and fulfils the criteria of the titanic myth, especially of Byron´s version of this myth, which "no longer consists in the meaningful articulation of the subjectivity, but in its deconstruction" (Procházka, Martin, "Titanic Myth and Discourses of Subjectivity", offprint, Prague: 1993).

Frankenstein, isolating himself and forgetting his family and friends, ignoring the world, loses the contact with reality and, in fact, loses control of himself: "I seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit." Escaping from the created thing at the moment of animation and refusing to accept the responsibility for its existence, Frankenstein seems to deny the responsibility for the dark and danger recesses of his mind. His furious reactions on every attempt by the Monster to come near reflect his unconscious fear of the Monster`s being a part of himself ("Abhorred monster! Fiend…! Devil… do you dare approach me?… Begone, vile insect!"). In this respect, Frankenstein´s aversion to the Monster reflects his fatal unwillingness to admit the polarities of his own personality, which may remind us of Karl Jasper´s view of "the battle of man and demons". Analyzing the tragic hero figures, Jaspers observes that evil powers escape man if he is able to grasp them or just understand them. Otherwise, unknowingly and unconsciously, "he falls prey to the very powers that he wanted to escape" (Jaspers, Karl, *Tragedy Is Not Enough*, transl. by H.A.T.Reiche, London: 1953). A similar idea is suggested, for example, at the end of Lynch´s TV series *Twin Peaks*.

The gradual development of Frankenstein´s personality from the dream of a noble career to the moment of identification with the Monster ("I, the true murderer…", "all was the work of my hand", "they all died by my hands"…) is mirrored in the images of the buildings (the laboratory replacing, in fact, the prison-like space of gloomy Gothic castles) and of the landscape (the "sublime and magnificent" scenes of the Alps with "immense mountains" and "waterfalls", the deserted grave-yards, the remote, desolate and windy islands, and, finally, the Polar areas of an empty and limitless space of the ocean). The frequent images of water in

the novel can be interpreted as an ancient symbol of the mind, the mirror of the self. And the motif of a boat carried around by the wind, preceding Frankenstein´s encounter with the Monster, may suggest the hero´s yielding to the unconscious forces he cannot control any more. (To a large extent, Mary Shelley´s imagination was influenced by the Romantic poetry, especially by Coleridge and his concept of inner landscape, the landscape of the soul).

As it was mentioned, the stories of fiendish doubles formed a part of Mary Shelley`s cultural environment. However, her Monster differs from its predecessors. Unlike them, its hatred turns not only against its double but also against Frankenstein`s family and friends and against "all mankind". The danger ceases to be a private matter, being enlarged into social and universal dimensions. The tradition of the English Gothic novel with its terror of uncertainty and disquieting expectations (Walpole, Reeve, Radcliffe…), turns into a chilling cognition. The "black-veil" method of Ann Radcliffe, with the object of terror half-covered, is replaced by a direct presentation of horror in its naked form.

On the deepest level the image of the Monster is a projection of Mary Shelley`s personal anxieties. Causing the death of her mother by her birth and living a lonely childhood with the father who did not fulfil her need of a parental love, experiencing the death of her half-sister Fanny and daughter Mary, and feeling herself guilty for the suicide of Harriet, the first wife of Shelley, Mary Shelley lived in a constant fear for the lives of those she loved. Even in the periods of stress, however, she tried to look calm and indifferent and her personality was often compared to ice. It is impossible not to remember the significance of cold and ice in the world of the Monster. She says in her journal: "Have I cold heart? God knows! But none need envy the icy region this heart encircles…" In a letter to Byron she writes: "I am said to have a cold heart – there are feelings however so strongly implanted in my nature that to root them out life will go with it…" and in a letter to her son these feelings are compared to "a stinging monster" (*Mary Shelley`s Monster*, 14).

Anyway, as Martin Tropp points out, even if both Frankenstein and the Monster probably find their origin in the author`s own feelings of exclusion and self-hatred, they were related to a larger themes and turned into characters of a new myth.

When Mary Shelley was working on her novel, the effects of the Industrial Revolution (or of Blake`s "dark Satanic Mills") intensified the anxiety of the Romantic generation. For the modern reader the connection of the Monster with the dangers of technology is even more pressing. Born of a scientific ambition and endowed with the endless potential for destruction, this figure has become a symbol of modern science.

In the Monster Mary Shelley created a predecessor of all the androids and robots rising against their creators, and turned the Gloomy Romantic feelings into the alarming questions of science fiction. As Fred Botting points out, with the theme of science in horror fiction there is a significant divergence from Gothic strategies: "cultural anxieties in the present are no longer projected on to the past but are relocated in the future" (Botting, Fred, *Gothic*, London: 1996). The figure of Frankenstein´s Monster undermines all attempts at closure and reflects critically on them to open up spaces where otherness cannot be mastered.

Accordingly, modern monsters become subject to dispersion and multiplication of meanings. Frankenstein´s nightmare influenced the literary works like *Moby Dick*, *Wuthering Heights*, or *Dr.Jekyll and Mr.Hyde*… In the 20th-century literature, the artificial forms that are given life and gradually turn to destructive forces appear, for example, in William Gibson´s novel *Neuromancer* (1984) or in Ridley Scott´s *Blade Runner*, the dark side of technical development is dealt with in Terry Jones´s *Fantastic Stories* (a parallel between ancient devils and modern means of transport). It is especially the loose boundary between good and evil, between heroic and villainous figures that is employed in a number of modern comics drawing on the image of a superhero as well as in the images of cinema and television A parodized image of Frankenstein-like creature appears in *Edward Scissorhand*, the theme of

intolerance towards the other is employed in Lynch´s film *The Elephant Man* and the same director develops the story of sinister doubles in his *Twin Peaks*.

It would be difficult to make a list of all the movies attempting to re-create Mary Shelley´s tale itself (J.Searle Dawley´s *Frankenstein* (1910), Joseph Smiley´s *Life Without Soul* (1915), James Whale´s *Frankenstein* (1931) and *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), R.V.Lee´s *Son of Frankenstein* (1939), E.C.Kenton´s *The Ghost of Frankenstein* (1942) and *The House of Frankenstein* (1944), R.V.Neill´s *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (1943), Charles Barton´s *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948), H.L.Strock´s *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein* (1957), H.V.Koch´s *Frankenstein* (1958), Terence Fisher´s *Frankenstein Created Woman* (1966), Paul Morrissey´s *Andy Warhol´s Frankenstein* (1974), Mel Brooks´s *Young Frankenstein* (1974)…).

According to Berman, "the process of creation and modernization promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world, but it also threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are". (*Mary Shelley´s Monster*, 1977). In the story of Frankenstein and his Monster, Mary Shelley re-establishes the relation between an individual freedom and individual responsibility. The moral message of this story can be discerned in the final decision of Walton, the narrator echoing the figure of Coleridge´s wedding guest: the way out of the "icy regions", the way to reconciliation and renewal, the liberation from monsters cannot be found but through a certain humility with which a man uncovers his human limitations.

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