"Giving Form to Dark, Shapeless Substances": the Clash of Novel and Romance in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein.*

When we think about the English Romantic Movement[1], the names that come to our minds are those of the great poets, Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, for instance. And the titles that occur to us are, naturally, those of the great poems: "The Prelude", "Ode to the West Wind" and "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage". No doubt, it was a period in which poetry was the bulk of literary production. Most prose writers of the period wrote works that were not Romantic in the sense that the works of the afore mentioned poets are. Such is the case of Jane Austen, who remained untouched by the violence of the movement. As a matter of fact, Jane Austen, along with Sir Walter Scott, is one of the few prose writers of the period whose works received great public and critical attention, despite the dominance of poetry.

If we look at the Romantic Movement so as to situate it in the history of English literature, we observe that it flourishes at a particularly important moment in the course of the development of the novel. By the time Mary Shelley published her first novel, in 1818, she had behind her a tradition of more than seventy years of novel writing.

The new genre, as a product of the modern age, had taken, necessarily, modern forms and concerns. Its concerns are those of the society in which it appears: a growing sense of individualism and a thirst for the observation and scrutiny of life as it is lived by ordinary people and a wish for an individual pursuit of truth.

[1] The terms "Romantic" and "Romanticism" have presently acquired very broad and sometimes loose significations in a way that definition becomes inescapable. What I refer to as The English Romantic Movement in this work is the prose and verse literature produced in England from 1798 (date of the first publication of *Lyrical Ballads*) and 1832 (date of the death of Sir Walter Scott, when most of the Romantic poets were dead or had stopped writing).

> Previous literary forms had reflected the general tendencies of their cultures to make conformity to traditional practice the major test of truth: the plots of classical and renaissance epic, for example, were based on past history or fable,(...). This literary traditionalism was first and most fully challenged by the novel, whose primary criterion was truth to individual experience – individual experience which is always unique and therefore new. The novel is thus the logical literary vehicle of a culture which, in the last few centuries, has set an unprecedented value on originality. (WATT, 1959:13)

This emphasis on "truth to individual experience" leads the novel to assume extremely flexible formal conventions, especially when compared to long-established literary forms, such as the epic or the tragedy for example.

It was eighteenth century England that fostered the first period of intense production of great novels. This period, according to historian Walter Allen, goes from 1740, with the publication of Richardson's *Pamela*, to 1771, with the publication of Smollet's *Humphry Clinker*. After that, the novel underwent a period of literary barrenness, which lasted about thirty years and came to an end only when Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen made the genre extremely popular again in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. By then, the genre had already undergone its foundational phase and was already constituted, relying on great names such as Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding and Daniel Defoe for the establishment of its tradition. It is at this moment that the young Mary Shelley sets out to write a work of literature in prose. Being the novel already established and characterised by the flexibility of its form, Mary Shelley was faced by a frighteningly high number of formal conventions to deal with. The way Mary Shelley dialogues with this tradition in *Frankenstein* is what I look at in this paper.

Although this dialogue happens in the literary domain, it is intensified by the fact that both her parents[2] were famous writers during their lifetimes and by her mother's death at her birth. As a teenager, Mary Shelley had already become a keen reader of her mother's works, and established with her a relationship that also happened only in the literary domain.

The story of the composition of *Frankenstein* is one of the best known in the history of English literature, even if much of this knowledge is based on rumours. When Lord Byron proposed to the group assembled at his summer residence that each should write a ghost story, Mary Shelley felt compelled to give her artistic response to the works of her friends, who were the greatest English poets of the time. It was certainly a *tour de force* for an eighteen-year-old girl to engage in the writing of a novel when she has such a strong relation to past and present writers. And it is clear that she was aware of the weight of the tradition she would have to carry on and felt the anxiety of all that influence, as Harold Bloom would put it. The marks of this are strongly felt in *Frankenstein*, to which two texts have become so much interconnected that I take them as parts of the novel: the Preface, written by Percy Shelley, and the Author's Introduction, written by Mary Shelley herself in 1831, fifteen years after she had written her first novel.[3]

The Author's Introduction is supposed to work as an "appendage (...) confined to such topics as have connection with my [Mary Shelley's] authorship alone" (MARY SHELLEY, 1999:5). However, the text is far from achieving such objectivity. It is written in a quasi-poetic tone and, although based on fact, is almost as fictional as the novel itself. The account of the

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[2] Mary Shelley's parents were William Godwin (1756 – 1836), author of *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness* (1793) and Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (1759 – 1797), author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).

[3] The Author's Introduction was written by Mary Shelley on the occasion of the third edition of *Frankenstein* under the request of the publishers of the Standard Novels. The Preface was written anonymously by Percy Shelley in 1818 for the first edition. As the novel was also published anonymously, the readers naturally identified the writer of the preface with the writer of the novel. Because it was Percy Shelley that recommended the book to the publishers rumours emerged at that time that he was the real author of *Frankenstein*.

conditions that helped Mary Shelly conceive the idea of the book are all seen through a Romantic perspective and designed so as to corroborate the Romantic idea of an author's poetical imagination. But it certainly reveals much of the anxiety that is dramatized in the novel. The author tells the readers that "[her] husband ... was from the first very anxious that I should prove myself worthy of my parentage and enrol myself on the page of fame. He was forever inciting me to obtain literary reputation." (MARY SHELLEY, 1994:6). She also tells of the distress Byron's proposition caused her and how she felt, before actually being a writer, the 'anxiety of influence'

> I thought and pondered – vainly. I felt that blank incapability of invention which is the greatest misery of authorship, when dull Nothing replies to our *anxious* invocations. 'Have you thought of a story?' I was asked each morning, and each morning I was forced to reply with a mortifying negative. (Italics mine) (MARY SHELLEY, 1994:8)

The main role of this Introduction is to connect *Frankenstein* to the project of the Romantic Movement and disengage it from the family of the gothic novels with which it had been, by 1831, closely identified. A further step in this sense is attempted at the Preface. Written by Percy Shelley for the first edition of the novel, it is an effort to link *Frankenstein* to a great and prestigious literary tradition. It also tries to detach it from Gothicism by stating that "I have not considered myself as merely weaving a series of supernatural terrors. The event on which the interest of the story depends is exempt from the disadvantages of a mere tale of spectres or enchantment" (MARY SHELLEY, 1994:11). And then the supposed author proceeds to explain the method of composition used in the book and justifies it by saying that "The *Iliad*, the tragic poetry of Greece, Shakespeare in *The Tempest* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and most specially Milton in *Paradise Lost* conform to this rule" (MARY SHELLEY, 1994:11).

Despite their importance, these are only peripheral examples of Mary Shelley's struggle with the tradition. I now proceed to examine five traits in *Frankenstein* that I understand as marks of the clash between the new forms established by the rise of the novel, old tendencies already present in medieval romances and the contemporary aesthetics of the Romantic Movement.

1. The Moral Fable

When we think of the word "fable", we quickly remember of Aesop's fables, texts with a clear moral message. Although they date back to the years before Christ, the influence of a moral attitude in fiction remained at least up to the eighteenth century and is to be felt in some of the texts of the first novelists. Richardson, for instance, sums up the moral tone of his first novel in the subtitle *Virtue Rewarded*, and Fielding makes clear in the preface to *Joseph Andrews* that his book differs from those "commonly called Romances (...), which contain, as I apprehend, very little instruction or entertainment" (1956:xxvii). The same attitude characterized much of the literary criticism in eighteenth-century England, when literary reviews and periodicals became popular. Indeed, if we look at the first reviews about *Frankenstein*, we notice that many writers agree on the point that the violence displayed in the novel deprives it from correct moral values.

When Percy Shelley writes in the Preface,

> I am by no means indifferent to the manner in which whatever moral tendencies exist in the sentiments or characters it contains shall affect the reader: yet my chief concern in this respect has been limited to the avoiding of the enervating effects of the novels of the present day, and to the exhibition of the amiableness of domestic affection, and the excellence of universal virtue. The opinions which naturally spring from the character and situation of the hero are by no means to be conceived as existing always in my own conviction; nor is any inference justly to be drawn from the following pages as prejudicing any philosophical doctrine of whatever kind. (MARY SHELLEY, 1999:12)

he is, in the name of the author, trying to protect the novel from the moralist critiques they knew it would receive. It is as if Mary Shelley had to apologise for writing a book that "inculcates no lesson of conduct, manners, or morality; [a book that] cannot mend, and will not even amuse its readers, unless their tastes have been deplorably vitiated"[4]. It is as if she had to apologise for being a Romantic. And the apology goes even further when Percy Shelley writes in an 1832 review for the *Athanaeum* that the moral of the novel is that if you mistreat a person, he or she will become evil. *Frankenstein* was thus provided with a politically correct moral.

Looking into the text of the novel, we observe that the form of the moral fable is indeed present in it. After all, we do have a story of a man who destroys his own life by breaking limits, be it the limits of science, of God, of nature or of whatever kind. We do have a story of a creature who becomes evil because he has been treated ill. The warning against excessive ambition and against social and racial seclusion is there and it helps establish the moral pattern of the novel. However, the high degree of ambiguity existing in *Frankenstein* does not admit of any unambiguous meanings and so Mary Shelley has her protagonist, at the very end of the novel, reinstate the moral of the book only to immediately contradict it:

> "Farewell, Walton! Seek happiness in tranquillity and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. Yet who do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, *yet another may succeed*" (MARY SHELLEY, 1999:210)

This speech by Victor Frankenstein has the effect of problematizing the use of the form of the moral fable in the novel. The same effect is caused by the opposition of the philosophy of

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[4] John Croker. "Review of *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*", *Quartely Review*, 18 (1818), p. 385. Quoted IN: SCHOENE-HARWOOD, Berthold (ed.). *Mary Shelley. Frankenstein. A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism.* Cambridge: Icon Books, 2000, p. 18.

Rousseau – that man is naturally good – to the premise of Gothicism – that evil is inherent to man. Again no answer is hinted at and again the moral given is contradicted.

2. The Narrative Structure

The complex narrative structure of *Frankenstein* has a curious effect, which conforms to what Ian Watt considers to be the primary criterion of the novel: "truth to individual experience" (1959:13), being this criterion what makes realism one of the distinguishing characteristics of the first novels. By arranging a scheme of three concentric narratives with three protagonists for narrators, Mary Shelley achieves the same effect of realism aimed at by the first novelists.

Each of the three narrators tells his own story with techniques for providing it with credibility. Robert Walton, the author of the most external narrative layer, uses the technique popularised by Samuel Richardson in *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, introducing the form of the epistolary novel to *Frankenstein*. The impression conveyed to the reader by this formal convention is one of reality: what is being read is not an invented story, but letters telling of what really happened. The name of an addressee, a date and a place of reference all contribute to this effect.

The second and third narrators apply to their narratives the same technique Daniel Defoe used to produce the effect of reality: insistence on detail. In order to explain to Walton how he came to be lost in the artic, he goes back to tell the story of how his parents met, got married and brought him up. He reports in minutia his intellectual development, how he came to be interested in natural philosophy and every single step he took in the search for the principle of live, its discovery and the making of the Creature. Naturally he does not forget to mention names of relatives, friends, professors, acquaintances and even authors. He does not keep from describing in detail the geography of the places where he lived, worked and studied.

Walter Allen says of Defoe that, in *Robinson Crusoe*, "he produces his illusion of complete reality by employing a mass of circumstantial detail of a kind no one, we think as we read, would bother to invent" (1975:38). The same can be said of Mary Shelley when she created Frankenstein as a narrator. Now there is only one thing he refrains from explaining in detail: the scientific procedure which led him to the discovery of the principle of life. And the solution Mary Shelley creates for not having to explain what is actually inexplicable is quite clever: she has Victor claim that he will never pass on to any one the cause of his misery. By doing so, she preserves the novel's sense of reality and again hints at the ambiguous moral of her text.

The same insistence on detail is found in the Creature's narrative. It describes with empirical precision all the process through which it came to apprehend the world around it, but its narrative has a quality which is initiated in Walton's, advanced in Victor's and then taken to perfection in the heart of the novel: the strength and violence of feeling. The passion with which it describes its grief at the sense of utter loneliness, its admiration of nature and its diabolical thirst for revenge conveys a sense of "truth to individual experience" with incredible intensity.

3. Travel Writing

Although the tradition of travel writing dates back to Petrarch's account of his ascent to the Mount Ventoux, in 1336, the form achieved intense popularity in eighteenth century England. Its highest achievements in the literary field are Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Swift's *Gulivers Travels* (1726). Fictionalised travel writing can be seen as an important precursor of the novel in the sense that it values detailed description of characters and background.

Travelling was indeed a recurrent activity in Mary Shelley's life. After her elopement with her future husband, she led a roaming life, with residences in several countries. It is known that most of the setting of *Frankenstein* consists of places she visited, hence the eloquent

description of scenery in it. Mary Shelley was herself a travel writer, having published two works of this kind: *History of a Six Weeks' Tour through a Part of France, Switzerland, Germany and Holland: With Letters Descriptive of a Sail round the Lake of Geneva, and of the Glaciers of Chamouni* (1817) and. *Rambles in Germany and Italy, in 1840, 1842 and 1843* (1844).

The descriptions of Victor Frankenstein's hometown are mostly taken from the same material Mary Shelley used for the composition of *History of a Six Weeks Tour*, this book being about the trips she took immediately before and during the writing of her first novel. But the most intense influence of travel writing can be found in chapters eighteen and nineteen, when Victor leaves his home for Scotland in order to work on the construction of a female creature. These chapters describe the trip taken by Victor and Clerval in a way very characteristic of travel literature. The account of their descent of the Rhine echoes Mary Shelley's tour of the same place. Several passages of these chapters bear striking resemblance to passages in *History of a Six Weeks Tour* and in Mary Shelley's diaries from 1815 and 1816. The vivacity of these descriptions contribute to intensify the impression of reality in the novel.

4. Gothicism

Gothicism has become the most famous characteristic of *Frankenstein*. However, if we look at the works by Ann Radcliffe and Horace Walpole, the founders of the gothic novel, and try to point at their similarities with *Frankenstein*, we may find some difficulty. Mary Shelley's first novel is exempt from the most renowned elements of gothic fiction. No ruined castles on top of lonely hills are to be found. No secret passages, no underground vaults or spiral staircases; no secret murders, no fragile heroines oppressed by evil villains, no ghosts have their place in the fictional universe of the novel. The account of Victor's visit to dissecting rooms, cemeteries and

charnel houses in search of pieces of dead bodies is perhaps the only evident gothic trait of the book. But it does not last longer than a page.

The Preface to the novel makes clear attempts at disengaging it from gothicism. These attempts, however, are only necessary because the author is somehow aware that gothic traits exist, even if to a small degree, in her work. What led to an identification of *Frankenstein* with the eighteenth century gothic novels, I believe, was primarily its conveyance of fear through the destructive power of the Creature. But *Frankenstein* actually goes deeper into gothicism and strengthens some of its features. Emphasis on emotion and passion of feelings and its reliance on the irrational are also found in sixteenth and seventeenth century romances, but they acquire an essentially modern outlook when treated in the novel as an essential part of the individual experience. This was incorporated to gothic literature through *Frankenstein* and the Romantic Movement. Indeed, the affinities of Mary Shelley's first novel with gothicism can be better understood in terms of the novel's affinities with Romanticism.

5. Imagery

Frankenstein has not often been read as a Romantic work. However, an analysis of patterns of imagery in the novel reveals striking parallels with much of the Romantic poetry. Due to the vastness of this theme, I limit these comments to an examination of two seminal images from Romanticism and their appearance in *Frankenstein*.

The image of nature is one of the defining characteristics of English Romanticism. It is so much present in the poetry of Wordsworth that he is often called "the poet of nature", a title that, in many aspects, could apply to Percy Shelley as well, author of such poems as "The Sensitive Plant", "Mont Blanc" and "Ode to the West Wind", all of them contemplating elements of nature. The same contemplation appears in Victor's account of his childhood and the Creature's

narration of its first months after the creation. In several decisive moments in the novel, nature assumes an active role and gets to the point of interfering in the character's actions, as it happens when Victor is on the way to first meet his Creature. The coldness of the icy place reflects Victor's desolation and the accidents of the geography are symbolic of the difficulties he has to surpass to face his creation. At other moments, nature takes on the mysterious and menacing aspect that it has in Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, for example. The scene of the first meeting between Creature and creator is echoed by the scene of the last meeting. In both it is the fog and the waves that have the power of revealing or concealing the Creature, that appears, at these moments, as an element of nature. The very first appearance of the Creature happens at "about two o'clock [when] the mist cleared away" (MARY SHELLEY, 1999:23) and its last display, it is "soon borne away by the waves and lost in darkness and distance" (1999:215).

Another fundamental Romantic image is that of revolution. Rebellion against any kind of established rule, be it artistic, social, religious or political is a distinguishing mark of the lives and works of most of the Romantics. Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* is one of the best-known treatments of the image of revolution. Its affinities with *Frankenstein* start on the subtitle, *or The Modern Prometheus*, and permeate the novel with reinstatements of the Prometheus theme, which is analogous to the theme of revolution. The theft of the fire is echoed by the discovery of the divine spark and the rebellion against the father is seen both in Victor's transgression and in the Creature's revenge.

Although *Frankenstein* shares several other kinds of images with the Romantic Movement[5], these two are the most outstanding and suffice to support the idea of this paper.

[5] The use of patterns of imagery derived from mythology and from the Romantic notion of poetic imagination are among the most noticeable traits that link Mary Shelley's novel to the English Romantic Movement.

In this kind of study about Mary Shelley's first book, I see a starting point for research concerning thematic and aesthetic tendencies in the nineteenth century English novel. In *Frankenstein*'s recovery of features of romance, through gothicism and imagination, and its treatment of the conventions perfected by the first novelists, lie an advancement on the form of the English novel in the sense that the elements so far incorporated by the new genre are accommodated and invested with new complexity. Several conventions are juxtaposed, contrasted and weaved into an organic structure.

Many critics of *Frankenstein* have remarked how this novel, as a literary construct, bears striking similarities with the Creature it gives birth to, both being made of ill-assorted parts that somehow may be in conflict with each other. Mary Shelley's technique of bricolage is not only evident in the characterisation of Victor's creation, but in every aspect of the book. To what extent this technique may have influenced the novel as a genre has still to be investigated. Perhaps this patch-work like book, as well as the patch-work like Creature, may serve as a metaphor for the nineteenth century English novel.

Key-words: Prose genres, novel criticism, *Frankenstein*.

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