

MORPHEUS OF THE ANGELS AS LITERARY PROJECT. SHAPESHIFTING ONTO THE BODY

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ABSTRACT. What is the body and why is it important to be aware of its existence even in Romanticism, where it was oftentimes appreciated not at its face value, but for what it could be or could have been, so much so that it became *loci communes* to think of it in immaterial terms as shape, idea, wandering soul, or other indefinite substitutes for reality? This paper is especially concerned with a thought raised by new readings of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, namely that well into the second decade of the 1800s, Romanticism seemed to have encouraged such elaborated views of the body that it became either a vacated, subhuman form or, on the contrary, an idealized, ethereal individual beyond belief. In truth, however, what this literature created was a disproportionate being, a monster whose main failing – apart from his lack of harmony – was that his very existence circumvented all frames of reference. Since the new being was a human creation achieved at the expense of reason, albeit with the aid of science, the outcome seen as a post-human artifact would be discussed over against the elevated tone of this epistolary novel and the much calmer attitude of its author, who had the chance to take a closer look at the book fifteen years into its publication. The accent here falls on the elusive body and its affiliated metamorphosis, a concept that forms the red line of our present argument.

KEY WORDS: shape, monster, body, Romanticism, calm

Introduction

Is the body mainly a shape? And does this shape originate in our thoughts rather than our sight? When it comes to literature, these are mainstream questions since, as the Greeks used to put it, the body/shape emerges from an idea/dream, thus it proceeds from Hypnos (Somnus in Latin) or the god of sleep, the half-brother of Thanatos (Death). Hypnos in turn was represented in people's dreams by Morphé, a winged being who creates language for humans while in a state of confusion. The same Morpheus was later a dominant figure in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* cast of characters, along with his brothers Phobetor (the Frightener) and Phantasos. Because this representation of the dream god is singular in Ovid's work, he is perhaps the first literary invention of a bodily creature to transcend the space of mythology. Throughout the ages, this image of the body challenged human history up to the Romantic

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era, which instead begat the idea of shaping a creature out of human trash, thus prompting the appearance of Frankenstein's monster. As the name calls, the monster lacked harmony even as a project and later on it frightened people in real life. The monster's complexion challenged the Promethean image of man/body in 1818, when again it was built on Victor Frankenstein's reading of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Our aim here is to question the appearance of the body versus the real body as a reason to further a realistic literature today, which is fairly able to realize that the gap between a Promethean/utopian body and a posthuman/dystopian body highlights the flaws they both entail.

The Scary Body

As the Greeks say, the coming into shape is nothing else than a derivative of the idea, of one's dream, which is a very intuitive conclusion if we take Aristotle, for instance, to have said of the Pythagorean School and Plato before him that their concept of nature and matter on "has nothing certain and definite", thus suggesting the possibility of "incorporeal matter (see Aristotle in Cudworth 1845, III: 127 ff). This is a well deserving notice, even if Cudworth's all-encompassing three-volume treatise on the Greeks' material universe was from the inception, *i.e.* from its very subtitle an attempt "wherein all the reason and philosophy of atheism is confuted, and its impossibility demonstrated." Nevertheless, the assessment that the immaterial brings about the shape begs the question: is the shape really confined to the body being present in it? In *Crowell's Handbook of Classical Mythology* from 1970 there is a particular chapter titled "Somnus", where Edward Tripp unfolds the story of Morpheus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in showing that it implies a literary presence rather than a mythical stance (and that, in fact, this is Ovid's first major improvement of the antiques' take on the Sleep deity).

Thus, Morpheus' literality is given by an externalization or *prosopopeia* of Somnus into Morphé, which is shaping first-hand, or more exactly "The Fashioner", while it becomes more relevant and distinct in the companionship of his brothers, Phobetor ("the Frightener of Men", usually represented by a snake or insidious beasts) and Phantasos (people's "Fancy" disguised in the elements). Together they are winged materializations of Somnus ("Hypnos") and are shown accordingly in Ovid's work only (see Ovid 2009, Book 11, v. 970-1000, 1010- 1030). Moreover, neither Morpheus nor Iris, the forerunner of the Olympian gods (which is herself a winged phantasy represented in the rainbow) were praised by the mortals in the ancient times, even though when he haunted their dreams Morpheus would appear in human body, while on the other hand the sight of Iris was undoubtedly in the eyes of the beholders.

On the other hand, David Hillman and Ulrika Maude, editors of *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature* (2015) propose in the seventeen

chapters of their compendium a presentation that is nothing short of a marathon throughout several centuries of the body being radiographed in as many different ways: the Mediaeval *soma*, countless types of disabilities, a continuous fluid during Renaissance and the Modern times, dysfunctional nutrition and obesity, the body language, the maternal body, pain, violence, aging and death, racism, technology and affections and, last but not least, the posthuman body in the shape of Frankenstein's monster. For it was indeed Victor Frankenstein who, in his day dreaming of a grand invention, put together a hideous body out of beautiful parts only after vividly reading Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. It is Paul Sheehan in the same compendium who concurs that once brought to life this sort of body would never converge into a unitary organism. The resulting assemblage which is the posthuman body emergent in the English Romanticism at the turn of the 19th century was but a literary chimera of Morpheus as it challenged the historical, Promethean image of man. The Promethean coinage of the body as a strong, autonomous and almost utopian organism and, on the other hand, the posthuman, disconcerting assemblage of a body which is prison for the mind first suggested by Mary Shelley, were revitalized in today's SF works as a literary attempt at supporting the humanist project with its personification of human imagination as either winged creatures or amorphous or disfigured bodies.

Intended, as the subtitle informs, to be the "Modern Prometheus", Frankenstein's monster promised in Shelley's 1818 novel all the features of a Romantic genius: Victor Frankenstein gives him a mind like no other, and his brainpower surpassed all the other men's intellectual capabilities, since by no aid this creature's brain easily captures new information and renders the speech abilities of a well-mannered gentleman in the liking of his creator's mentors, which would have been esteemed teachers of the late European Enlightenment. In the 1994 movie "Mary Shelley's Frankenstein", for instance, the creature even inherits Doctor Waldman's brain, who admittedly was Frankenstein's professor, albeit hidden in a commoner's body that belonged to Waldman's killer (see Schor in Schor, ed., 2003: 81). In the end, the monster retains what can be seen as the elongated natural proportions of a human being, for he is 8-foot-tall.

This last hint already informs on the precise context in which every great mind fails to reach its potential: even if much more agile than the bravest soldier of the human species, the monster will know the boundaries within which its undead, organic body withholds his most excellent brain. The new organism, created at the peak of humanism, is right from the start endowed with the memories of his brain-dead predecessor, which speaks for his not being a prototype himself, but rather a postponed realization of the memories of his antecedent body. The new "creature" is not properly born, and in the process of his social development he does not change into a "more"

evolved body. The monster learns how to speak and he becomes emotionally vulnerable as well, thus in so doing he both experiences human feelings and sufferings and, in the ensuing narrative, he allegedly becomes a revengeful serial killer. Hence we learn first hand that the contradictions of Enlightenment were never a far cry from the double nature of the Romantic genius or of man in general.

Even though he is made out of parts, Frankenstein's monster is not partially human, for his creator patterned him as human. However, he surpasses humankind because the humans he encounters flee away in fear and horror: they do not even gather around to make a spectacle out of him, as in the old. He might well be proportionally human, at least so his creator thinks of him, and yet he finds himself shaken by his very looks displayed in the mirror. His reaction replicates his creator's words upon first seeing his invention: "His limbs were in proportion, his features... beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath...; his hair was of a lustrous black, his teeth of a pearly whiteness, but... his eyes watery..., his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips" (Shelley 2020: 51). In view of the monster's encompassing all the peculiarities of a Romantic character, such as the lack of blood flow, the mimics of an animate body, the hiding from and disguising in society, etc., it is Shelley's prerogative to propose to her readers this post-Enlightenment post-human sort of prototype, whose passions trigger all the events and crises in her novel.

The fact that externally humans are composed harmoniously does not necessarily mean that internally they are spared to concoct monstrous plans. Much to the same, while this particular monster was assembled as to seem proportionately human, that did not mean that he was able to live with himself harmoniously. In fact, Mary Shelley learned volumes about the external and internal lack of harmony in her very own family. For instance, her father, the renown political philosopher William Godwin spoke in a radical manner about the fabricated British virtues and social excellence of his time, and instead called to anarchism both in his *Abolition of Marriage* and his 1794 novel, *Things as They Are; or, the Adventures of Caleb Williams*. On the other hand, her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, who died eleven days into her birth, is perceived even to this day as a resound feminist philosopher because of her 1792 treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. The book was written five years before Mary Wollstonecraft married Godwin (and during her affairs with two other men), a marriage that took place just a few months prior to her death in childbirth. In it, the author remembers the French Revolution as she had witnessed it herself. It is thus no wonder that she insists on the review of both Talleyrand's stress on the domestic education of women and the traditional books of conduct's blatant optimism regarding home virtues along the centuries. Thus, Wollstonecraft's book is a plea for a rational, reformed

education system, where women ought to enjoy a status tantamount to their position in society and their strive in and outside the home (see MacKenzie 1993: 35-55).

For more than ten years, to be sure, Mary Shelley left her publishers and readers bedazzled as to the possible events and motivations that prompted her to grow such gloomy thoughts as those that drove her to create her monster. In 1831, when she finally unravelled this “mystery” for the “publishers of the *Standard Novels*” in her introduction to their new edition of *Frankenstein*, she noted that she only did that at their expressed “wish that I should furnish them with some account of the origin of the story” (Shelley 2020: xxix). It is thus dully noted that thirteen years into the publication of *Frankenstein* this account regarding the origin of the very idea preclude the many fabricated theories of a young Mary Shelley writing the novel at 18 – three years after her visit to Gernsheim and the nearby Frankenstein Castle in Germany – or her entering a competition for the most horrific story along with Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron. This last theory was most probably based on the century’s appetite for the new galvanic theories and the three friends’ common passion for mysticism and the occult, or the society’s love for everything non-human (see Ellis 2010: 61-75), meaning animals of all sorts as exerted in Byron’s poems *Epitaph to a Dog* (also known in a seemingly altered version as *Inscription on the Monument of a Newfoundland Dog*), *There is Pleasure in the Pathless Woods*, etc. (see Byron 1835: 75). As for Mary, she must have barely been 15 years of age when admittedly her father took her to London’s Royal Institution to hear Sir Humphry Davy, a poet as well as a chemist lecture on “the nature of the principle of life” (see Wright, “The Conversation”, 2018), an event whose effect upon the young girl can be seen as fortuitous if one thinks it immediately made such an impression on her that she put together galvanism, the theory of light, and electricity and thus brought about a monster consistent with her later principle of artistic creation.

The Calm Response

As for Shelley and her unmistakable calm, in the same 1831 introduction she brought light upon this mystery, and while she vividly remembers her past she alludes to a certain change and settled tradition that her family’s artistic attitudes created in the timespan of thirty years: “How I, then a young girl, came to think of, and to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea?... It is not singular that, as the daughter of two persons of distinguished literary celebrity, I should very early in life have thought of writing. Still... my dreams were more fantastic and agreeable than my writings... (Shelley 2020: xxx). Admittedly, Shelley would have mastered the style of her parents’ works and she would have expressed her own account of their characters’ traits and trials. Thus, the whole story around Falkland’s mysterious early life of good

fortunes as a wealthy and kind-hearted estate master, who afterwards came to acknowledge his sins to Caleb in the third volume of William Godwin's *Adventures of Caleb Williams*, the intricacies of this voluminous story, the sudden fits of rage that the character displays, and the constant surveillance and pursue of the first-person narrator must all have been later coordinated events in Shelley's plan to produce a Gothic-like character that suddenly turns from the initial magnanimous figure into a hideous criminal. A similar metamorphosis takes place in Shelley's own 1831 short story *Transformation*, where Guido's so-called pact with the devil, who comes in the shape of a nefarious "misshapen" creature forces him to switch bodies with the beast, and thus his *peripeteia* discloses a series of events that take place under the shield of night and nightmare with a psychological twist. In fact, even as she sent the story to *The Keepsake* for publication, Shelley continued to write a number of three titles and be acknowledged by its editor as "the Author of Frankenstein" (see Mary Shelley in Frederic Mansel Reynolds, ed., 1831: 18-39).

Nonetheless, Shelley is determined that her characters would not rest in the shadows of her father's cast, because surprisingly enough they are not first and foremost Romantic, and her novel is definitely not picaresque either. "I lived principally in the country as a girl", Shelley expands, "and passed a considerable time in Scotland... my habitual residence was on the blank and dreary northern shores of the Tay, near Dundee. Blank and dreary on retrospect I call them; they were not so to me then. They were the eyry of freedom, and the pleasant region where unheeded I could commune with the creatures of my fancy... I could not figure to myself that romantic woes or wonderful events would ever be my lot; but I was confined to my own identity, and I could people the hours with creations far more interesting to me at that age, than my own sensations" (Shelley 2020: xxx). It is the same atmosphere that around the same time that Shelley recounted her past, inspired Alfred Tennyson's poem *In Memoriam AHH*, a poem inviting to calm in the midst of death, grief, and despair: "Calm is the morning without a sound/Calm as to suit a calmer grief.../ Calm and deep peace in this wide air,/These leaves that redden to the fall;/ And in my heart, if calm at all,/If any calm, a calm despair..." (Tennyson 1901). Calm is also a concept which for this Victorian poet entailed the need to bring back a sort of lost peace and quietude. Calmness, on the other hand, has always had its nemesis in literature, an idea present in Horace as well. A special kind of fear of not selling his soul/liberty for money and thus be seen as a mere well-mannered slave (a reference to his father's emancipated status of freedman) always advised Horace to stay poised (see Horace 1978).

When Shelley first produced *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* for publication in 1818 in three volumes, she precluded the first volume with a quote from Milton's *Paradise Lost* that he himself paraphrased using the

biblical image of the creation of the first man in Genesis in a rhetorical stance: “Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay/ To mould me man? Did I solicit thee/ From darkness to promote me?” (Shelley 2020) This was a reminder that her own work instated a paradigm by depicting a context of creation like no other: for her novel it all began in 1815, the “year without a summer”, a time when she and a company of friends holidayed on Lake Geneva’s Villa Diodati in June, and a challenge was set forth that everyone present should enlist a contest of writing his/her very best ghost story (see “The Independent” 2018). Vacationing during such a turbulent “wet, ungenial summer” was indeed a challenge in itself, and not only because of the unpredictable, altering weather, but because a lot had changed in the lives of those present: Byron married in January, Mary and Percy Shelley lost their baby girl in premature birth a month later, almost 100,000 people died during and after Mount Tambora erupted in the Dutch East Indies wreaking havoc and bringing aggravated climate change across Europe, Shelley’s first wife Harriet committed suicide, the “Seventh Coalition” formed against Napoleon, Switzerland finally became a neutral country, and by the end of that year Jane Austen’s *Emma* was published.

This “calm despair” made the context in which the idea and the monster came into being. Socially, to talk about the “effect” of Mary and Shelley’s escapade, or the fact that they lost a child conceived out of wedlock would be wide of the mark. Aesthetically, however, it is the writer herself that fifteen years later brings her personal thoughts on the subject to the fore, while she ponders on specific issues related to contemporary style and themes in the novel. In the same preface to the third edition of *Frankenstein* from 1831, she makes a poignant remark by somehow diverting from her own situation back in 1815: “I am by no means indifferent to the manner in which whatever moral tendencies exist in the sentiments or characters shall affect the reader; yet my chief concern in this respect has been limited to avoiding 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” (Shelley 2020: 1, 2). It was not a thing of “beauty” what Mary devised in her outstanding novel, and perhaps it wasn’t necessarily a desire to “satisfy the intellect” in search of the “truth”, or to “excite the heart” looking for “passion” either: if Poe had proposed that writers pursued these two effects in their novels by all means (see Poe 1846: 163-167), Shelley seemed to have first taken into account precisely the “circumstances” of her writing, which Poe excluded from the very beginning as “irrelevant to the poem *per se*” (Poe 1846: 163). Notwithstanding the fact that Shelley’s work is hardly a poem, it is nevertheless central to our point here that Poe explicitly referred to circumstances in relation to the “intention” with which an author should write. Although

Shelley's novel derived partially from a bet, it encapsulated a lot more of her own experiences and upbringing than it is transparent at first glance.

And yet, the novel's tone is constantly calm, and its epistolary style, evocative as it is, allows for a detachment rarely seen in a Romantic novel. In spite of revealing things most fascinating in nature, coming from a quite recent past, Walton, the narrator seems pleased with his poised last description of the novel's monster, as the creature pays his last respects to his creator: "I entered the cabin where lay the remains of my ill-fated and admirable friend. Over him hung a form which I cannot find words to describe – gigantic in stature, yet uncouth and distorted in its proportions. As he hung over the coffin, his face was concealed by long locks of ragged hair; but one vast hand was extended, in colour and apparent texture like that of a mummy" (Shelley 2020: 239). Indeed, the monster appears both new and old at the same time, and the fact that a comparison with ancient mummies is made could be the most competent description of the creature, since a mummy has not been yet displayed in Europe, but the art of cropping spices like *mumiyā* from old, dried corpses was a frequent practice made into trade as early as the second century A.D., so much so that in the 16th century it expired due to the expanding counterfeit markets where fake "healing" bitumen was being sold (see De Urreta 1610; Paré 1582).

This particular "narrative situation" in this "atypical" epistolary Gothic novel is just one of the instances where the first person narrative, or the "I as witness", ingeniously creates a "frame narrative", a narration within a narration, as Stanzel labeled it (1986: 201, 209) while analyzing the relationship between the situations in the novel (or the narrative structure) and their "effect" on the reader (see an interesting explanation of Stanzel's theory of the novel, among many others, in Wolschak 2013). Applied to Shelley's novel, with every narrative circle the "Russian doll" effect (see Benford 2010: 324) of the story is less susceptible to harm the intended reader, *i.e.* Margaret Saville from England, to whom her brother, Captain Robert Walton writes his curious letters about Frankenstein and a certain monster that the latter created, as the sister never receives the letter because the conditions in the Arctic Ocean make postal shipping impossible. These "grades of mediacy" (Stanzel 1986: 22) or postponing of both the first narrator's experience in the epistolary genre, and of the story, which constantly cannot be revealed directly either in the middle of things or anytime soon after it is related is what renders this novel to be perceived as atypical, while its effect upon the reader loses momentum as the receiver is never in harm's way by the monster or the adventures (Stanzel 1986: 269). The same is true in what the novel's "moral" effect is concerned, and Shelley was right to foresee this outcome: her contemporaries would not find lessons on social or matrimonial etiquette in Frankenstein's story, for the intended effect is neither to teach and exemplify

“universal virtue” nor to demonize ill-shaped creatures on account of the sores they could cause to well-mannered individuals. Because the effect is not immediate, because the monster is not heard of moments after the letters are written, and also because it is clear that in the meantime the I narrator got a glimpse of the monster several times, it is unlikely that the centrality of the story falls on this monster with a hideous body who frightens (like in Phobator), but rather on the writer’s calm and poetical, metaphorical reflection on this body’s features and realism (like in Morphé).

Conclusions

Nowadays, the case of shape is closely reexamined in both artistic and political forums, as it is increasingly anticipated that once the shape is out of sight, literature and politics will themselves lose their framework. When classic readers and realistic literatures disappear, perhaps there remain no sufficient reasons to write using authentic models that at some point in their life had the perspective of loss and death. Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* alludes to the display of shape with the purpose of boosting the reader’s faith in the novel’s need for realism, which is only convincing in the presence of the body. Compared to the first Prometheus, Frankenstein’s monster is the image of a post-human body and mind, as he shows all the attire of modernity: although he sports an unmatched strength and mind, these traits only make him the opposite of Prometheus, for this made up creature is bound by his emotions to remain a barbarian in faraway territories. Yet Shelley proposes that we treat him with calm right when the narrator in his letters attempts to show the real measure of his countenance. The element of surprise that the unveiling would have brought was not the effect Shelley intended for her novel, and the spectacular character of both the events and the monster was intentionally postponed as to counterbalance the moral expectations of her contemporary society, as they were not meant to frighten or educate, but to secure the presence of the body in a moralist, post-human society.

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