

More Horrible than the Monster: Social Antagonism and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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Received January 15, 2017; Revised May 21, 2018; Accepted May 22, 2018; Published May 26, 2018.

Abstract

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has often been considered as a political novel and an attempt to account for the dire consequences of the failure of the French Revolution. However, contrary to the common vogue for identifying Frankenstein's monster with the negative dimensions of political and revolutionary movements, a careful reading of the novel reveals a deeper problem hidden behind the figure of the monster. This study is an attempt to read *Frankenstein* in the light of the politico-psychoanalytical ideas of Slavoj Žižek in an attempt to prove the fact that the monster is Mary Shelley's fantasy construction in order to conceal the ontological antagonism which marks the socio-symbolic order. By drawing on Žižek's concept of fantasy and its role in obfuscating the fundamental inconsistency of the Other, the research has tried to disentangle the world of the novel from the horrible presence of the monster, by bringing to light a more frightening horror against which the monster turns out to be a protective screen, namely, the horror of the Real.

Keywords: fantasy; French Revolution; the Real; the monster

Introduction

Ever since its first appearance in 1818, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has been the center of numerous critical debates. The wide range of meaning associated with Shelley's *magnum opus* points to a thematic richness which has turned it into a proper ground for the establishment of a dialogue among different, and often contradictory, viewpoints. Of course, the *locus classicus* of the novel regards Victor's Frankenstein's creation of the monster, the central problem around which the entire narrative revolves. For a large number of critics, Victor's creationist act signifies the destructive and detrimental effects of an uncontrolled scientific drive, that is, a human effort to trespass the boundaries of humanity and reach out for the far recesses of divine knowledge. Another group of critics have focused on the familial issues addressed by the novel. According to J. M. Hill, for instance, any critical appreciation of the novel can take as its point of departure "the commonplace that *Frankenstein* is a family romance" (as cited in Crisman, 1997, p.27). These readings often divide into two groups: one group reads the novel as an account of the parent-child relationship, usually under the light of the psychoanalytical notion of the Oedipus complex; the other group tries to locate the roots of the novel in the problematic of the sibling bond/rivalry, which according to Leila S. May (1995) informs the nineteenth century's "obsession with the family, particularly in England," and its anxiety "about the horizontal line of the family axis, and, most specifically, about sisters as they relate to each other and to their male siblings" (p. 699). For May, therefore, *Frankenstein* "can be read as a novelistic commentary on, and reaction to, the male Romantic poet's compulsion to rend(er) sisters," who "must remain utterly passive,"

otherwise, once active, “become monstrous” (p. 670). For another group of critics, the character of the monster is the representative of all the repressed “others” who finally manage to break the chains of containment and take vengeance on their oppressive society. (These others, of course, include among others the women in patriarchal societies, and the working-class under global capitalism). For example, “feminist scholarship,” according to Patricia Comitini (2006), “has interpreted the novel as a social critique of the domestic sphere, patriarchal relations, gender formation and feminine creativity” (p. 183). From another perspective, *Frankenstein* is, according to Adriana Craciun, “a kaleidoscopic political imaginary that has helped regenerate the novel’s iconic status for new generations,” with the monster’s “protean ability to voice and embody a remarkable range of later political crises – from revolutionary Marxism, Irish independence, abolition and slave rebellions, to animal rights, human cloning and genetic research” (as cited in Smith, 2016, p. 84).

Of course, the list remains non-inclusive of all the readings and critical discourses dealing with *Frankenstein*. However, there is a certain passage in Shelley’s masterpiece the full significance of which for a better understanding of the novel seems to have gone unnoticed by the critical legacy. Near the end of the novel, when the crew have finally decided to head back towards England and forsake the direful enterprise of conquering the North Pole, Victor addresses Walton with his final words:

During these last days I have been occupied in examining my past conduct; nor do I find it blamable. In a fit of enthusiastic madness I created a rational creature, and was bound towards him, to assure, as far as was in my power, his happiness and well-being. This was my duty; but there was still another, paramount to that. My duties towards my fellow-creatures had greater claim to my attention, because they included a greater proportion of happiness or misery. Urged by this view, I refused, and I did right in refusing to create a companion for this first creature...The task of his destruction was mine, but I have failed... Yet I cannot ask you to renounce your country and friends, to fulfill this task... That he should live to be an instrument of mischief disturbs me... Farewell, Walton! Seek happiness in tranquility, and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed. (Shelley, 1869, p. 172)

In spite of the uncertainty which surges in the overall passage, the reader cannot fail but to notice a resolution in Victor’s words regarding the legitimacy of the project. The fact that Victor, after all that has happened to him due to his creationist act, does not find himself “blamable,” and his concluding remark that in spite of *his* failure in realizing his dreams others would perhaps be able to realize *theirs*, opens the space for the possibility of an ultimate fulfillment and marks, with positivity, the Romantic concept of ambition. Read in the light of the monster’s final sacrificial retreat into the far recesses of the Pole and the work’s probable thematic interrelation with the French Revolution, I propose that *Frankenstein* was Mary Shelley’s attempt to come to terms with the traumatic failure of the Revolution in realizing the sublime ideals of freedom, liberty, and fraternity, and her belief in the possibility of socio-political harmony and consistency. In other words, I will argue that *Frankenstein*, as a narrative, was Shelley’s ‘fantasy scenario’ to solve the fundamental deadlock which underlies the social and political sphere. In doing so, I will draw on Slavoj Žižek’s concepts of fantasy and ethics.

Argument

One of the aspects of *Frankenstein* which had been directing more attention to itself is its relationship with the French Revolution. According to Essaka Joshua (2008), “critics have recently connected *Frankenstein* with this period of social upheaval, reading the novel as an ‘allegory of the French Revolution, the attempt to recreate man and the disillusionment and terror that followed’” (p.23). In fact, such an association with the socio-political events in France has always been one of the defining features of the Romantic literature. “British literature and culture of the Romantic period,” John Mee and David Fallon (2010) contend, “are steeped in the discourse generated by the Revolution” (p. 1). The French Revolution, in Percy Shelley’s words, was “the master theme of the epoch in which we live...a theme involving pictures of all that is best qualified to interest and to instruct mankind” (Ingpen and Peck, 1965, p. 199). Of course, the early days of the French Revolution had brought with them the promise that, after centuries of unjust and tyrannical rule of monarchs and kings, after centuries of exploitation of people at the hands of their oppressors, the dawn of freedom and liberty, of equality and fraternity, had finally arrived. It was for the first time in history that people seemed to have found the opportunity to decide for their own lives and write down their own destiny. Such a prospect could not fail to kindle in the heart of many young contemporaries the flames of hope and expectation. However, their dream did not last long before it turned into the most horrible and frightening nightmare. It took only four years after the Storming of the Bastille, which had been hailed throughout the Europe as the beginning of a new era of democracy, for the Reign of Terror to take the course of the Revolution into the opposite extreme. Thousands of heads dropped under the sharp blades of guillotine in the name of democracy and protection of the people’s Cause. Terror turned into an act of ethical significance, into the only proper tool for preserving the fruits of the Movement from rotteness and decay. In the famous words of Robespierre,

If the basis of popular government in peacetime is virtue, the basis of popular government during a revolution is both virtue and terror; virtue, without which terror is baneful; terror, without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing more than speedy, severe and inflexible justice; it is thus an emanation of virtue; it is less a principle in itself, than a consequence of the general principle of democracy, applied to the most pressing needs of the patrie. (as cited in Alvarez and Tristán, 2016, p. 55).

To the young intellectuals of the age, who had grown utmost sympathy for the spirit of the Revolution, these events proved too shocking and traumatic. For years, they had defended universal freedom and democracy, gained by means of revolution, against conservative political and intellectual figures of the time, such as Edmund Burke, who, in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, had denounced the French Revolution as the movement of “a swinish multitude,” a “monstrous tragi-comic scene” in which “the most opposite passions necessarily succeed, and sometimes mix with each other in the mind; alternate contempt and indignation; alternate laughter and tears; alternate scorn and horror” (p. 11). Of course, the tragic finale of the Revolution proved the correctness of Burke’s political views. However, for its supporters, the tragedy was more than having merely lost a political debate. In fact, it delivered a fatal blow to their belief, not in a particular political regime but, in humanity as such. In Žižekian terms, it was a moment when the Romantic ideology was pushed to its limits, when the intrusion of the real of political and social antagonism into the symbolic picture brought the system to the point of self-negation, rendering the ideological master-signifiers powerless in providing a logical answer to the questions raised by the socio-political events of the time. In that situation, nothing was like before any more; all the ethical and moral predicates, which had hitherto been consecrated as the

conditions of the possibility of humanity, were put under the biggest question mark, if not suffering wholesale refutation by those who had once held the strongest faith in humane values: “most woeful for those few who still / Were flattered and had trust in human-kind: / They had the deepest feeling of the grief” (Curtis, 2009, p. 300, lines 387-389)

From this perspective, the creation of the monster in Shelley’s novel coincides with the ‘monstrous’ consequences of the French Revolution. That is to say, Victor’s failure in acknowledging the true nature of human knowledge and its boundaries, led to the creation of a monster who brought ruin to the life of his own creator, precisely the way the French revolutionary mobs wreaked havoc on their own lives due to their ignorance of the true nature of freedom and liberty. According to Lee Sterrunberg, “If the characterization of Victor Frankenstein owes much to Godwin’s utopian writings and to the body of the literature that grew up in response to him, Frankenstein’s monster, in contrast, rises from the dead body of writings on the French Revolution” (Levine and Knoepflmacher, 1982, p. 152). Such a reading of the Revolution, as a dream turned into nightmare because of the short-sightedness of the revolutionary forces and their incapability in negotiating the problems, is the ideological fantasy *par excellence* employed by *Frankenstein*. Actually, the fantasy at the heart of Shelley’s novel is that the tragic outcome of the French Revolution was not the result of the ontological antagonism which marks the social reality as such, but rather the result of an external element which impeded the full realization of the idea of the perfect society.

One of the most disturbing and unsettling facts about the ontological antagonism of a symbolic sphere is that it does not follow a linear, or better say, diachronic logic according to which the present absence is predicated upon a past presence; rather, it follows a radical synchronicity whereby the moment of loss coincides with the emergence of loss as such. That is to say, a common historical approach always presupposes a background to the social antagonism, trying to justify the social division and disintegration by positing a moment in the past in which a certain event has led to the present situation. However, upon closer inspection it becomes clear that the alleged loss is nothing but a fantasy construct in order to obfuscate the unbearable aspect of an irreconcilable conflict, that what we misrecognize as the loss of organic unity and coherence is in itself always-already lost. In other words, from a Žižekian perspective, the loss as such does not exist: the moment we become conscious of the underlying deadlock of our socio-symbolic reality, we indulge in the phantasmic experience of presupposing a mythical moment when our world was marked with perfect consistency and harmony, when we lacked nothing and had lost nothing in the first place.

The way ideology “occludes” this primordial antagonism is identical to the way a narrative is organized along the temporal succession of a group of events which are linked together by a causal relationship. That is to say, the ideological gesture *par excellence* is the one through which the absolute synchronicity of the emergence of the object and its loss is reorganized alongside a diachronic line of narration. Actually, the logic of fantasy provides a perfect explication of the ontological status of narrativization: “the answer to the question ‘Why do we tell stories?’,” Žižek (1997) argues, “is that *narrative as such* emerges in order to resolve some fundamental antagonism by rearranging its terms into a temporal succession. It is thus the very form of narrative which bears witness to some repressed antagonism” (pp. 11-12). This way, it is easy to explain the reason behind the human need for, and his dependence on, narratives throughout history, if we take into consideration the fact that, from the beginning of existence, human beings have felt the necessity of accounting for, in the form of story-telling and narrativization, the obvious shortcomings and lacks which constitute the very core of their being. Therefore, whenever we read a narrative, we

have to keep in mind that its very form of diachronic temporal succession of events conceals a hidden conflict and underlying deadlock in the social and personal life of the narrator. Also, we have to keep in mind that “narrativization is...misrepresentational in both its versions: in the guise of the story of the progress from the primitive to the higher, more cultivated form...as well as in the guise of the story of historical evolution as regression or Fall” (Žižek, 1997, p. 14). In our critique of an ideological discourse, thus, we have to undo the fantasy structure of the ideological narrative and re-translate the temporal and linear succession of events into the terms of a radical break and discontinuity between the present and the past.

Thus, it can safely be argued that Shelley's *narrative* was her phantasmic solution to the radical exteriority of the Real socio-political antagonism, her attempt to gentrify the traumatic events which followed the outburst of the French Revolution. *Frankenstein*, in this sense, is an ideological treatise written with the aim of finding a *culprit* who can be held responsible for the apparent inconsistency of the symbolic Other, thus saving the social reality from falling apart due to the revelation of its fundamentally antagonistic foundations. Frankenstein's scientific project failed because he, as a scientist, failed in his calculations, not because of the essential impossibility of the scientific project itself. As a result, the novel keeps the prospect of a future success alive, the prospect of an organic community purged from 'monstrosities'. In my opinion, it is only such a reading which can do justice to the final scene of the novel where the monster reveals his suicidal intentions. At the sight of the lifeless corpse of his creator, the monster assures Walton that he should not fear

that I shall be the instrument of future mischief. My work is nearly complete. Neither yours nor any man's death is needed to consummate the series of my being, and to accomplish that which must be done; but it requires my own. Do not think that I shall be slow to perform this sacrifice. I shall quit your vessel on the ice raft which brought me hither, and shall seek the most northern extremity of the globe; I shall collect my funeral pile, and consume to ashes this miserable frame, that its remains may afford no light to any curious and unhallowed wretch, who would create such another as I have been. I shall die. I shall no longer feel the agonies that consume me, or be the prey of feelings unsatisfied, yet unquenched. He is dead who called me into being; and when I shall be no more, the very remembrance of us both will speedily vanish. I shall no longer see the sun or stars, or feel the winds play on my cheeks. Light, feeling, and sense will pass away; and in this condition must I find my happiness. Some years ago, when the images which this world affords first opened upon me, when I felt the cheering warmth of summer, and heard the rustling of the leaves and the chirping of the birds, and these were all to me, I should have wept to die; now it is my only consolation. Polluted by bitter crimes, and torn by the bitterest remorse, where can I find rest but in death? (Shelley, 1869, p. 176)

This passage, with the prospect of the monster's death, betrays the text's belief in the contingency of Frankenstein's failure, and on a different level Shelley's belief in the contingency of the failure of the French Revolution. Frankenstein's bitter avowal that “I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed” finds its true weight in the light of the monster's removal from the scene, and it is precisely at this point that Comitini's reading of the novel reveals its theoretical deficiency. For Comitini (2006), the monster “is the excess of the Symbolic, or what Lacan would call the Real: that is, he is the very thing that cannot be inserted into the Symbolic Order, that which cannot be explained” (p. 193). Of course, it is true that the monster in the novel occupies the position of the external Other, forever remaining unassimilable to the symbolic texture. However, what Comitini misses is that, from Lacan's point of view, the Real, unlike the

monster, will never cease to be nor leave its place. As Lacan himself put it in the Seminar on *The Purloined Letter*, “the real, whatever upheaval we subject it to, is always and in every case in its place; it carries its place stuck to the sole of its shoe, there being nothing that can exile it from it” (Lacan, 2006, p. 17). Thus, if the monster were to represent the Lacanian Real, as Comitini claims to be, then the novel should have had quite a different conclusion, with the monster insisting on his existence outside the symbolic order, always a threat to the seeming consistency of the social sphere. However, the monster’s self-proclaimed retreat from the position of the Real necessitates a different reading. From a Žižekian perspective, the monster is not the representation of the Real, but a phantasmic object the very being of which functions to cover the void of the Real, namely, the impossibility of a consistent and unified society. In other words, what problematizes the identification of the monster with the Real is his *human* traits which make possible his containment inside the symbolic order. What we should not overlook is the fact that it was the very human society which first avoided the monster and not the other way. The monster wanted to be accepted as a part of the community, what he sought “was the love of virtue, the feelings of happiness and affection with which my whole being overflowed, that I wished to be participated” (Shelley, 1869, p. 175). Thus, in Shelley’s narrative, the monster functions as a fantasy screen which protects the Other from becoming conscious of its own ontological failure, a screen which protects us from the bitter realization that the Other does not exist. In other words, the monster in Shelley’s novel functions exactly in the same way that the “Jew” functions in the Fascist ideology, as a phantasmic creation which “in its positive presence...is only the embodiment of the ultimate impossibility of the totalitarian project – of its immanent limit...nothing but a fetishistic embodiment of a certain fundamental blockage,” through which “*social negativity as such assumes positive existence*” (Žižek, 1989, pp. 142-143).

Conclusion

The belief in the possibility of a final reconciliation between the layers of society, of an ultimate coincidence between the concept of the utopian society and its realization, was one of the most dominant and resonating themes in the literary production of the Romantic period. Percy Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, for instance, is the dramatic embodiment of such a belief in the possibility of a spiritual, social, and political regeneration, in the possibility of a successful Promethean revolution, championing love and freedom, against the Olympian injustice and oppression. Of course, Shelley’s bitter claim that “Our works of fiction and poetry have been overshadowed by the...infectious gloom” caused by the tragic finale of the French Revolution, ends in his positive prophecy that “mankind appears to me to be emerging from their trance. I am aware, methinks, of a slow, gradual, silent change” (Everest, 2014, p. 35). The same expectation for a dawning universal joy and freedom, in my view, is the spirit haunting Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, a suggestion which gains more weight when we remember that the subtitle to the work is *The Modern Prometheus*. However, unlike the dominant critical legacy which has always viewed the monster as *the* ultimate catastrophe, as the main source of horror in the world of the novel, the monster, in my view, conceals a horror more horrible than himself, namely, the horror of the Real.

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