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How Myth Becomes 'Fantastic':

Comparative Observations on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*

1. Introduction

Literary critics dealing with the fantastic generally agree on its semantic structure: It seems that the fantastic somehow puts together two incompatible domains, one usually being labeled as "natural" or "possible" and the other as "supernatural", "impossible", or "mythical". Thus the fantastic draws on myth insofar as myth is vaguely associated with the supernatural, the marvelous, and the impossible. This idea, however, of the function myth assumes in the fantastic is blatantly inadequate: Philosophically speaking, myth is, as Cassirer puts it, an autonomous form of culture or, if you want, a semiotic system, a way of world-making, to which common-sense-distinctions, such as those between the natural and the supernatural, simply don't apply.[1] Labeling a priori the magic forces that pervade the world of myth or the beings that people it, e.g. demons and gods, as supernatural or impossible, presupposes that the constraints of epistemic logic are universally applicable. That is obviously a fallacy.

Later in my paper, I will demonstrate this reductive trend in recent definitions of the fantastic. My goal consists in using categories provided not by formal logic, but by cultural theory and anthropology to investigate what happens when myth becomes fantastic. The main literary example will be a text often associated with myth and the fantastic, namely Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, written in Geneva in 1816 and first published in 1818.[2] This

1 See Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, vol. 2: *Das mythische Denken*, 8th edition, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1987.

2 Quotations hereafter are from Maurice Hindle's paperback edition (Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*, Harmondsworth: Pen-

novel is told on three narrative levels incorporated into each other, the first being the letters of Walton, an English explorer in the Arctic, the second the autobiography of Victor Frankenstein, a Genevan scientist, and the third his own artificial creature's, the 'monster's, autobiography.[3] The plot revolves around the central 'event' in Frankenstein's life: At the university of Ingolstadt, he discovers the secret of imparting life to inanimate matter and subsequently constructs the semblance of a human being. The creature, endowed with superhuman strength and size and terrible in appearance, inspires loathing in his creator and whoever sees it. Lonely and miserable, it turns upon its creator, and, failing to persuade him to provide a female counterpart, eventually murders its creator's closest relatives and friends, as well as his bride. Relentlessly, Frankenstein pursues it to the Arctic to destroy it, but dies in the pursuit, after relating his story to Walton. The monster then disappears to end its own life.

To detect the 'fantastic' qualities that the Prometheus myth assumes in this novel, I will first review in more detail some recent definitions of the fantastic and propose an alternative one, I will second list and analyze the thematic units that the novel adapts from the myth, and third conclude by briefly suggesting a comparison between the novel and other romantic adaptations of the myth which are not fantastic.

2. Definitions

Most of us know Todorov's ground-breaking definition of the literary fantastic as "l'hésitation éprouvée par un être qui ne connaît que les lois naturelles, face à un évènement en ap-

guin, 1992), which is based on the third edition of the text, published in 1831. For this edition, Mary Shelley made a number of substantial revisions, some of which tend to reinforce the fantastic element of the novel. (All quotations from Hindle's edition are followed by page numbers in parentheses.) – The 1818 base text is available in an excellent critical edition: *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, vol. 1: *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*, ed. by Nora Crook, introduction by Betty T. Bennett, London, Pickering & Chatto, 1996.

3 See Bennett's introduction in *ibid.*, pp. xxvii-xxviii.

parence surnaturel".[4] Trying to overcome the intuitive bent of this definition, recent criticism has attempted to explore the objective factors of the conflict inherent in the fantastic. Thus Nancy Traill, following Lubomír Doležel's possible worlds-semantics, states that "a work is fantastic if the fictional world is made up of the two alethically contrastive domains, the natural and the supernatural";[5] here, the logico-semantic term *alethic* which normally designates the three modalities in which a proposition is or is not true, namely possible, impossible, and necessary, serves to determine narrative modalities.[6] According to Traill, the "natural domain" is "*a physically possible world*" and the "supernatural domain" "a physically *im*possible world".[7] Traill's theory involves a distinction between physical and logical (im)possibility, as Doležel makes clear: "Fictional worlds that violate the laws of the actual [that is non-fictional, 'real', M. W.] world are physically impossible, supernatural worlds", but they remain "logically possible".[8] The fantastic, then, is a dyadic, but logically possible world.

This transfer of the modal logic's terminology however is contrary to the fact that the conflict staged by the fantastic is an overall cultural, not only logical conflict. A similar shortcoming is characteristic of Uwe Durst's recent theory. Durst defines fantastic literature as a "Genre, worin die traditionelle Kohärenz der erzählten Welt aufgehoben und durch die Konkurrenz zweier gleichberechtigter Realitäten ersetzt ist, die sich gegenseitig negieren."[9] And Durst goes on to explain that neither of these realities refers to non-fictional reality; on the contrary, they are to be understood as conflicting inner-fictional reality systems, one being 'regular' insofar as it hides its own fictional status, the other being 'marvelous' insofar as

4 Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Paris, Seuil, 1970, p. 29.

5 Nancy H. Traill, *Possible Worlds of the Fantastic: The Rise of the Paranormal in Literature*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1996, p. 9.

6 See *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) online, s.v. "alethic"; Lubomír Doležel, *Heterocosmica. Fiction and Possible Worlds*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, pp. 113-132.

7 Traill, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.

8 Doležel, *op. cit.*, pp.115-116.

9 Uwe Durst, *Theorie der phantastischen Literatur*, Tübingen, Francke, 2001, p. 13.

it unveils this status, thereby questioning the apparently 'regular' system. Located in the center of the spectrum formed by the two conflicting systems, the fantastic is, according to Durst, a non-system ("Nichtsystem").[10] Durst claims that his theory can leave out any reference to the rules that govern the non-fictional or 'real' world; this claim however contradicts his use of the term *regular* to designate one of the two conflicting systems (the other being 'marvelous'), because *regular* refers to a rule that is not fictional, but cultural, a fact that Marianne Wünsch seems to take into account in her forthcoming dictionary article on the fantastic: "Phantastische Literatur", she says, is a "eine Form (insbesondere: Erzählform) nicht-mimetischer Literatur, die in eine 'real mögliche Welt' eine andere, z.B. 'mythische Welt' einbrechen lässt, die dem dominierenden kulturellen Wissen des jeweiligen Publikums als unmöglich gilt."[11] Even if we overlook Wünsch's questionable use of the term *mimesis*, her definition proves to be reductive as well, as becomes clear when she explains what she means by 'unmöglich': "Eine Textwelt erscheint als unmöglich, wenn sie die (logischen, physikalischen, biologischen, weltanschaulichen) Basispostulate der jeweils dominierenden Realitätskonzeption verletzt".[12] Obviously, Wünsch too reduces the cultural conflict between the mythical and the non-mythical world to what Doležel labels a "modally heterogenous, dyadic world", that is "a unification in one fictional world of two domains in which contrary modal conditions reign".[13] Thus in Wünsch's definition as well, the fantastic 'Einbruch' of one world into another proves to be nothing but a split within one and the same logical modality, namely alethic.

10 Ibid., p. 101.

11 Marianne Wünsch, "Phantastische Literatur", in: *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft*, ed. Georg Braungart, Harald Fricke, et al., vol. 3, Berlin, de Gruyter, 2003 (in press).

12 Ibid. See also Hans Krah and Marianne Wünsch, "Phantastisch / Phantastik", in: *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe. Historisches Wörterbuch in sieben Bänden*, ed. Karlheinz Barck, Martin Fontius, et al., vol. 4, Stuttgart, Metzler, 2002, pp. 798-814.

13 Doležel, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

But if myth is one of the poles of the conflict staged by the fantastic, this conflict cannot be simply 'alethic', that is truth-related, for the simple reason that as a semiotic system, myth is alien to the logico-semantic differentiation between modalities such as alethic, deontic, axiological and epistemic;[14] therefore, the introduction – fantastic or other – of myth into a cultural context dominated by, say, the idea of the autonomy of the human mind and will, or by a notion of truth based on empirical science, will destabilize not only the rules of human knowledge, but also those of human behavior, in other words: the entire range of cultural activities and the differentiations within and between them (including the logical 'modalities'). As our reading of *Frankenstein* will show, myth becoming 'fantastic' may challenge the very foundations of our commonsense knowledge and ethics, namely the differentiations between body and soul, physical and mental reality, concrete phenomena and abstract laws, the self and the other, etc. In other words: What is at stake in the fantastic is not only the 'logical' or 'physical' possibility or impossibility of isolated mythical phenomena, but the cultural acceptability of myth as world-view in which those phenomena are grounded.

Modifying the above-mentioned definitions of the fantastic, I therefore arrive at the following working hypothesis: As an aesthetic procedure, the fantastic stages an unresolved tension between culturally heterogeneous semiotic systems; if myth as an apparently obsolete world view is one of them, the systems opposing myth are the differentiated natural and social sciences, as well as commonsense knowledge based on these sciences and on ethical concepts such as individual autonomy and responsibility.

3. From myth to the 'fantastic'

To determine which are the thematic units that Mary Shelley adapts from the Prometheus myth and how they become fantastic, let us briefly look at what the classical sources tell

14 See *ibid.*, p. 114.

us about the Titan. Hesiod relates that Zeus, the supreme god, hides fire from the humans, after being tricked by Prometheus into accepting the bones and fat of animal sacrifice, so that the mortals can keep the meat for themselves. Prometheus, however, steals the fire and returns it to Earth once again. As punishment for the theft and for humanity in general, Zeus sends them the first woman, Pandora, who proves to be the bringer of evils, hard work, and disease. Hesiod also relates that, as vengeance on Prometheus, Zeus has him chained to a Caucasian crag, where an eagle eats his immortal liver, which constantly replenishes itself. Prometheus never capitulates, though, and is eventually liberated by Hercules. – As for Aeschylus, he makes Prometheus not only the bringer of fire to humans but also their savior: The Titan prevents Zeus from destroying the humans by giving them all the arts and sciences as means of survival and progress. Here, the punishment is also motivated by Prometheus's uncompromising refusal to reveal the secret he knows about Zeus' future downfall. Whereas in Hesiod, he remains an ambiguous figure, because his very benevolence causes humanity's misfortune,[15] he emerges in Aeschylus as the true champion of humanity and as a sublime sufferer, constant in his rebellion against Zeus' tyranny.[16] Thus Percy Shelley, in the Preface to his *Prometheus Unbound* published in 1820, came to praise Prometheus as "the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature". He is, Shelley explains, "susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement". That is what distinguishes him from Satan, the hero of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, with whom the Titan shares "firm [...] opposition to omnipotent force".[17] Similarly, Byron, in his ode *Prometheus* written in 1816, proposes an allegorical and humanistic reading of the myth, presenting the Titan as a figuration of the

15 See Raymond Trousson, *Le theme de Prométhée dans la litterature européenne*, 3rd edition, Genève, Droz, 2001. pp. 33, 38-39.

16 See Albin Lesky, *Die tragische Dichtung der Hellenen*, 3rd edition, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972, pp. 137-138.

17 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, London, Oxford University Press, 1907 (reprint 1940), p. 201.

sublime strength of the human spirit, in Byron's words: "a symbol and a sign / To Mortals of their fate and force".[18]

As we will see, some of Victor Frankenstein's essential characteristics are related to these typical ancient and modern themes of Prometheus the fire-bringing culture-hero, the uncompromising rebel, and the sublime sufferer. In addition, Victor Frankenstein resembles Prometheus the creator of humankind from earth and water. This theme which goes back to other mythological sources, e.g. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (I, ll. 78-88) becomes in Renaissance thought an allegory of the autonomous person who, by educating himself, creates himself anew;[19] in 18th century aesthetics, it designates the autonomous creativity of the artist, in particular the poet who, to quote Shaftesbury's well-known metaphor, is "a second Maker, a just Prometheus under Jove".[20] In Goethe's *Prometheus* – both the dramatic fragment and the ode –, the Titan is a maker opposing Jove in his claim for radical autonomy. But this autonomy is associated with ethical, pedagogical, and political aims; it is thus counterbalanced by social concerns and also by Prometheus' love for Minerva and his responsible caring for his creatures.

Against this briefly sketched background, Mary Shelley's adaptation of the myth strikes us as an attempt to destabilize the meaning of the four themes that I just highlighted, namely the fire-bringing culture-hero, the uncompromising rebel, the (loving) creator of the human race, and the sublime sufferer. Departing from the humanistic tradition of these themes, a tradition continued by Goethe, Byron and her own husband, she restores and transforms into a contemporary cultural conflict the moral ambiguity of the Hesodian Prometheus. To be sure, this ambiguity had been carried on in anti-Enlightenment allegorical adaptations of the myth that linked the fire theft to the original sin.[21] But Mary Shelley's 'fantastic' adapta-

18 Lord Byron: *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, vol. 4, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986, p. 32.

19 See Jochen Schmidt, *Die Geschichte des Genie-Gedankens in der deutschen Literatur, Philosophie und Politik*, Bd. 1, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1985, pp. 256-257.

20 Quoted after Schmidt, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

21 See Trousson, *op. cit.*, pp. 268-280.

tion departs from this tradition as well. It can be seen, as I will now try to demonstrate, as a means of conveying new meaning to the old ambiguity.

Let us first look at her adaptation of the theme of the fire-bringing culture hero. The departure from the traditional humanistic understanding of the theme becomes evident from the start in what Victor Frankenstein tells us about the origin of his Promethean project to artificially create human life: As a young man, he felt un-attracted by the arts and social sciences (he mentions history, politics, language); instead, he was obsessed with an "eager desire to learn [...] the secrets of heaven and earth" (37) in order to achieve "power" that would enable him to improve human nature: "[...] what glory would attend the discovery [of the "elixir of life", M. W.], if I could banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!" (39-40). Disdaining contemporary empirical science because of its inability to meet this goal, he turns to an obsolete form of "[n]atural philosophy" (38), namely Renaissance magic and alchemy. Disillusionment comes about when, confronted with the phenomenon of lightning, he is given a pertinent modern scientific explanation instead of finding one in the authors he studied so far (among them Paracelsus and Agrippa von Nettesheim). Unwilling to "exchange chimeras of boundless grandeur for realities of little worth" (46), he abruptly turns away from all natural science, until Waldmann, one of his German professors at Ingolstadt, persuades him that modern scientists "have indeed performed miracles" and "acquired new and almost unlimited powers" (47). At this point, rediscovering ancient magic in modern science, Victor becomes fascinated with the latter, and, surpassing his professors, he finally reaches, by means of clandestine experiments, the "power" (46, 47, 52) he always aspired to:

> Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs. (52-53)

Obviously, the benevolence of this 'modern' fire-bringing culture-hero is flawed by his selfish ambition, which makes

him, as he himself stresses, not only instrumentalize science, but also isolate himself from his family, friends and acquaintances, repress all his natural affections "to fuel his intellectual and scientific pursuits"[22] and consider an absolute fatherhood, that is a fatherhood un-mediated by the sexual union with woman, as the human mind's ultimate triumph (53-54). Victor is not the Christ-like Prometheus whom Percy Shelley carefully distinguished from Satan. On the contrary, the pride he takes in his ambitious undertaking and the undertaking itself have something satanic, as he himself later admits in his conversations with Walton: "[...] like the archangel who aspired to omnipotence, I am chained in an eternal hell" (204). Passages like these certainly make for a satanic Prometheus, but, if taken out of their context, they do not necessarily make for a fantastic text. We might even be inclined to consider mythological references of that sort as purely rhetorical or, at best, allegorical illustrations of the totalitarian drive of Romantic idealism.[23]

However, the god-like being of Victor Frankenstein has been previously authenticated by Walton's, his alter ego's, letters that form the outer frame for Victor's narrative: It is true that on the one hand, Walton describes Frankenstein as a manic-depressive person (24-25); but on the other, as "divine wanderer", a martyr-like "wonderful man" endowed with what the German Idealists, in particular Schelling, labeled as 'intellectual intuition', in Walton's words: "an intuitive discernment; a quick but never-failing power of judgment; a penetration into the causes of things, unequalled for clearness and precision" (28). This characterization of Frankenstein's superhuman intellect is no doubt another allusion to Prometheus, the 'fore-thinker', whose divine knowledge, according to Hesiod and Aeschylus, rivals and even exceeds that of Zeus. Here however, it becomes clear that the function of the allusion is to feed a view of Frankenstein that is mythicizing, insofar as it presents an abstract philosophical concept as a

22 Paul A. Cantor, *Creature and Creator: Myth-making and English Romanticism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 111.

23 See *ibid.*, p. 132.

physically present, personal being.[24] This mythicizing view forms an unresolved tension with, and is not absorbed by, the simultaneously present psychopathological view of him as a manic-depressive person. Both are conflicting ways of attributing meaning to Frankenstein's "double existence" (28); the conflict remaining unresolved, the fantastic emerges here, in the outer frame, as an aesthetic staging of semantic instability.[25]

We now understand that Walton's letters create a semantic framework that conveys a function other than rhetorical or allegorical to the mythological allusions in Victor's own narrative: These allusions too feed a mythicizing self-perception of the protagonist, which forms an unresolved tension with his own psychological insights. The 'fantastic' quality of this tension becomes even more evident when we turn to the second of the thematic units mentioned above, namely the uncompromising rebel against Zeus. At first sight, this theme appears to be absent in the novel, because there seems to be no Zeus "for the modern Prometheus to offend".[26] However, the conflict between Prometheus and Zeus reproduces itself in the rivalry between Victor and a series of father figures that includes, apart from his biological father, his German professors. In the dynamics of Victor's ambition, they function as his models whom he strives to imitate and, in doing so, to surpass,[27] such that his relation to them becomes deeply ambivalent, blending admiration with aggression.[28] As it already

24 See Cassirer, *op. cit.*, p. 63: "Es [das mythische Bewusstsein, M. W.] 'erklärt' das individuelle Geschehen durch die Setzung und Annahme individueller Willensakte"; *ibid.*, pp. 71-72: "[...] die mythische *Denkform*, die alle Qualitäten und Tätigkeiten, alle Zustände und Beziehungen an ein festes Substrat bindet, führt immer wieder [...] zu einer Art Materialisierung geistiger Inhalte zurück."

25 See Durst, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-107.

26 Chris Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-century Writing*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987, p. 43.

27 This rivalry is emphasized by Krempe, one of Frankenstein's professors, in a conversation between himself, Victor, Victor's friend Clerval, and Waldmann: "'D-n the fellow!' cried he; 'why, M. Clerval, I assure you he has outstript us all'" (66).

28 I am referring here to René Girard's theory of mimetic desire; see Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, Paris, Grasset, 1972.

became clear, the meaning of Victor's ambition fueled by rivalry is god-like 'power', that is absolute fatherhood; no wonder then that his models take on divine, but, as rivals, also satanic features. This is the case with Waldmann in particular, whose god-like 'benevolence', 'sweetness', 'kindness' etc. (a characterization which recalls that of Victor by Walton), have the strange effect of demonic temptation, when they are associated with power, as is demonstrated by the following passage, in which Victor evokes the 'fatal' effect of the professor's already quoted words on the power of modern science:

> Such were the professor's words – rather let me say such the words of the fate – enounced to destroy me. As he went on I felt as if my soul were grappling with a palpable enemy; one by one the various keys were touched which formed the mechanism of my being: chord after chord was sounded, and soon my mind was filled with one thought, one conception, one purpose. So much has been done, exclaimed the soul of Frankenstein, – more, far more, will I achieve: treading in the steps already marked, I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation. (47)

If it is correct to assume that in *Frankenstein*, the structural equivalent of Prometheus' rebellion against Zeus' supreme authority is rivalry, and if rivalry proves to be the essence of Victor's scholarly endeavors and ambition (his name too points in that direction), then it becomes understandable why, in the quoted passage, this ambition is in turn mythicized, that is, blamed on an outside demonic force manipulating Victor. This force is the model experienced as demonic tempter, in Victor's own words: the 'fate', the 'palpable enemy'. The quoted passage, as many others, bears witness to this mythicizing understanding by Victor of his bold undertaking and of its murderous consequences, whereas in other passages, he adopts either a psychological view – e. g. when he speaks about the "resistless, and almost frantic impulse" in *himself* (53), that bids him repress all his natural feelings and affections to complete his work –, or even an ethical view, which consists in assuming individual responsibility not only for his undertaking, but also for the murders committed by the monster (see 85-86, 90, 157, 198). Victor's wavering between myth on the one hand and psychology or the ethics of individual

autonomy and responsibility on the other creates the unresolved tension that makes for the fantastic.

The most strikingly 'fantastic' effects of this tension doubtless grow out of Mary Shelley's adaptation of the third thematic unit we highlighted above, namely Prometheus the creator of humankind. But it is not the creator who is the bearer of the fantastic, nor is it the creature; instead, it is the relationship between them. Critics often have observed that the monstrous creature acts out his creator's own deepest and darkest urges by killing one after the other of his closest relatives and friends – a series of horrible crimes the climax of which is the murder of Victor's bride Elizabeth on the wedding-night.[29] Indeed, Victor's obsession with absolute fatherhood ultimately tends to destroy all creation that is not of his own making. From this perspective, the monster is Victor's double, an ugly "Doppelgänger" embodying his own destructive impulses. This might help us understand why Victor, the very moment he succeeds in giving life to his creature – "a convulsive motion agitated its limbs" (56) –, instead of being triumphant, experiences "breathless horror and disgust" (56). The narrator himself stresses his inability to explain this abrupt and un-promethean change of attitude; we however realize that it signals the shock Victor experiences when the monster's awakening confronts him with a living image not of his sublime impulses, but of their destructive reverse side that he fails to acknowledge. The narrator's account of the nightmare Victor has after the monster's awakening confirms this "Doppelgänger"-relationship between creator and creature:

> I thought I saw Elisabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her, but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of flannel. I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed: when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the wretch – the miserable monster whom I had cre-

29 See Cantor, *op. cit.*, pp. 112-113,117.

> ated. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. (57)

Both the killing of the bride (which foreshadows what the creature later acts out) and the identification of the dying bride with the dead mother reflect Victor's unacknowledged desire to do get rid of woman insofar as she stands in the way of absolute fatherhood.[30] Victor himself indeed *is* the monster. Many other verbal and behavioral similarities between creator and creature could be quoted to substantiate this claim.[31] Thus the monster, which strove to be its creator's Adam, ends up identifying itself repeatedly with Milton's Satan (97, 126, 132, 212-213), as Victor finally does himself. We might therefore be tempted to understand Victor's creation as projection, his creature as a figment of his imagination, and his narration as an allegory unmasking the destructive dynamics of masculine Romantic narcissism. This understanding however would be reductive and simplistic, since on the level of the novel's internal system of communication, the monster's objective and independent existence is authenticated by several persons,

30 For a fundamentally different, psychoanalytical interpretation of this passage, see Renate Böschenstein, "Doppelgänger, Automat, serielle Figur: Formen des Zweifels an der Singularität der Person", *Androïden. Zur Poetologie der Automaten*, ed. by Jürgen Söring and Reto Sorg, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 1997, pp. 165-195: "Die Schilderung der Arbeit an der Erschaffung eines Menschen aus dem Material, das Friedhöfe, Seziersäle und Schlachthöfe liefern, macht überdeutlich, dass die Mutter zu neuem Leben erweckt werden soll. In einem Traum nach dem Akt der Belebung des künstlichen Menschen verwandelt sich die blühende Schwester-Geliebte in die tote Mutter – und erwachend erblickt der Sohn sein missratenes Geschöpf, dessen Hässlichkeit in ihm eine panische Abwehrreaktion hervorruft. Deren Stärke verrät, dass mit der 'Hässlichkeit' ein moralisch völlig Inakzeptables gemeint ist. Es ist das coming-out einer zweiten Person im eigenen Innern, die das Ich nicht als Teil seiner selbst anerkennen will. Als inhaltliche Füllung für den Umriss dieses verworfenen Ich-Teils bieten Kontext und Formulierungen Eifersucht, Inzest-Angst, homosexuelles Begehren an. Entscheidend ist, dass die Verwerfung durch das dominante Ich das nach Liebe dürstende, ursprünglich naive und sensible Triebwesen zum Verbrecher macht. Bis zum Schluss bleibt Frankenstein blind für seine Schuld gegenüber der selbstgeschaffenen – d.h. in dieser Lesart: in ihm herangewachsenen – Kreatur" (p. 181).

31 See Cantor, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-107, 128-132.

among them Walton and the monster itself, insofar as it speaks up (other than in some movie versions of the novel), and demonstrates, in its own autobiographical narrative, that far from being a killer from the start, it was naturally benevolent; it is only when it becomes aware of its monstrous appearance that it is being made and makes itself a monster, because it is forced, by its creator, to remain isolated, without a female counterpart. We could even go so far as to say that Victor makes his creature become his monstrous double. In short, the relative independence and individuality of the monster opposes his status as a mere figment, thus contributing to a semantic tension which is typical of the 'Doppelgänger'-theme.[32]

But this is not the deepest level of the fantastic in the relationship between creator and creature, as becomes evident when we look at passages like the following in which Victor himself muses about the possibility that he might in fact be mad and the monster nothing but a projection of his inner being into the outside world:

> [...] my imagination was busy in scenes of evil and despair. I considered the being whom I had cast among mankind, and endowed with the will and power to effect purposes of horror [...] nearly in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave, and forced to destroy all that was dear to me. [...] I remembered also the nervous fever with which I had been seized just at the time that I dated my creation, and which would give an air of delirium to a tale otherwise so utterly improbable. I well knew that if any other had communicated such a relation to me, I should have looked upon it as the ravings of insanity. (74)

We may view this insertion of a possible reading of the text into the text as an instance of what according to Friedrich Schlegel is a hallmark of 'romantic' literature, namely 'poetic reflection' ("poetische Reflexion").[33] Here, this device no doubt has a 'fantastic' effect by producing an interference of

32 See Renate Böschenstein, "Nachwort", in *Doppelgänger. Phantastische Geschichten*, ed. by Renate Böschenstein, München, Winkler, 1987, pp. 338-366.

33 See Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. by Ernst Behler, vol. 2, Paderborn, Ferdinand Schöningh, 1967, p. 182-183. (Athenäum-Fragment 116).

two separate levels, namely on the one hand the fictional world, in which the monster is objectively real, and on the other an analysis of this world, according to which the monster is nothing but a figment of Victor's imagination. But the semantic tension resulting from this interference is not only logical (or, if you want, alethic), but overall cultural: Contradicted by the staged objective reality of the monster, Victor's hypothetical analysis of the monster as a figment of his own imagination betrays a deep sympathy with that sort of 'delirium', insofar as it might also be seen as the poetic imagination's magical power of bringing into objective existence fancied mythical beings ('my own vampire', 'my own spirit let loose') and mythical 'relations' about those beings. Thus the tension between myth and its understanding as mental illness remains unresolved: Myth is translated into mental illness, but at the same time, mental illness is retranslated into myth.

The ethical aspect of this cultural conflict becomes evident when we briefly look at the way the fourth thematic unit of the Prometheus myth is adapted, namely the sublime sufferer. In the last episode and the exodus of Aeschylus' tragedy, Prometheus' unwavering refusal to give in to Zeus threatening him with ever increasing suffering makes him a sublime figure; in the final part of *Frankenstein*, as well as in Walton's opening and concluding letters, this sublime attitude is echoed in the immense suffering of the protagonist relentlessly persecuting the monster to the Arctic: Walton characterizes him as "noble and godlike in ruin" and admires the "greatness of his fall" (203). And Victor himself presents the heroic "pilgrimage" (197, 202) he has undertaken for the best of humanity as a kind of fate tragedy (Schicksalstragödie): "I was cursed by some devil, and carried about with me my eternal hell" (197). However, the devil being at the same time Victor's creature, the creator's sublime and allegedly altruistic suffering may also be seen as another manifestation of his ambition, a self-made way of proving himself, as he himself unwillingly reveals when he tries to prevent Walton, the explorer, from treading in his footsteps: "'[...] whither does your senseless curiosity lead you? Would you also create *for your-*

self and the world a demoniacal enemy?'" (203).[34] Thus the monster replaces the satanic father figures who stimulated Victor's ambition; not surprisingly then, creator and creature in the end become rivals in their attempt to surpass each other not only in making each other suffer, but also in experiencing suffering insofar as it signifies the sublime: "Blasted as thou wert, my agony was still superior to thine" (215), declares the monster, addressing its dead creator. The fantastic destabilization of meaning emerges here as unresolved tension between the sublime inherent in the adapted theme of Prometheus the indomitable sufferer and the analysis of the sublime as a grandiose form of self-deception.

3. Conclusion: From unresolved to resolved tension

As we have seen, Mary Shelley's adaptation of the Prometheus myth can be described as 'fantastic', insofar as the allusions to this myth feed a mythicizing view of the narrated persons and events which forms an unresolved tension with the simultaneously staged psychological, ethical or otherwise critical assessments of the same persons and events. Let me conclude by stressing once again that this adaptation of the myth contrasts with other contemporary adaptations, in which the tension is reduced, if not resolved. I mention but two, namely Percy Shelley's already quoted *Prometheus Unbound*, and Giacomo Leopardi's philosophical tale *La scommessa di Prometeo (Prometheus' Bet)*, written in 1824. In Shelley's lyrical drama, the central event of the lost second part of Aeschylus' trilogy, that is the liberation of Prometheus, is made to mean the utopian renovation of humanity and nature through the overcoming of evil (embodied in Jupiter) by the autonomous human will (embodied in Prometheus). Thus the Spirit of the Hour declares at the end of Act III:

> The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains
> Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed – but man:

34 My emphasis.

> Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless,
> Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the king
> Over himself; just, gentle, wise – but man [...].[35]

This utopia is brought about not by Prometheus' reconciliation with Jupiter (who, on the contrary, is definitely overthrown), but by Prometheus' repenting his earlier curse of Jupiter: "I wish no living thing to suffer pain".[36] The liberation of Prometheus thus signifies allegorically a moral transformation, as all mythological events of the play signify, in Shelley's own words, autonomous "operations of the human mind".[37] As a result, the semiotic tension between myth and idealistic ethics is reduced, if not resolved.

The aesthetic form of this reduction or resolution is the sublime, whereas in Leopardi's tale it is the comical. A travesty in the vein of Lucian's *Dialogues of the Gods*, the tale relates a competition between the gods for being the best inventor. Prometheus claims that his invention, the human being, is "la più perfetta creatura dell'universo".[38] Momus, the god of mockery and censure, contests this claim, so that he and Prometheus decide to bet on it: The outcome will depend on whether in at least three of the five continents of the Earth, both gods will find proofs for or against Prometheus's claim. In America, they meet with cannibals eating their own progeny (and procreating only to that end); in Asia, they witness a cruel funeral ritual, and in Europe – London –, they are confronted with suicide motivated by "tedio della vita" (disgust with life).[39] No wonder then that after this series of three grotesque disillusionments, Prometheus gives up and admits to having lost the bet. After the second disillusionment already, Momus syllogistically tries to prove that humanity is indeed the summit of all living species, "ma sommo nell'imperfezione, piuttosto che nella perfezione".[40]

35 Shelley, *op. cit.*, p. 249 (*Prometheus Unbound*, Act III, 4, ll. 193-197).
36 *Ibid.*, p. 211 (Act I, l. 305).
37 *Ibid.*, p. 202 (Preface).
38 Giacomo Leopardi, *Tutte le poesie et tutte le prose*, ed. Lucio Felici and Emanuele Trevi, Roma, Newton & Compton, 1997, p. 521.
39 *Ibid.*, p. 524.
40 *Ibid.*, p. 523.

No less than Shelley's sublime reading of the myth, Leopardi's comical reading is allegorical: Both aim at attributing a stable meaning (be it humanistic or pessimistic) to the myth. In Mary Shelley's fantastic novel on the contrary, the myth's function is to destabilize meaning ('mutability' is a key word of the novel.) Why is that sort of destabilization so attractive to the reading public? Probably because it playfully questions the constraints not only of our knowledge, but also of our ethics and of our legal system, both being based on the notions of individual autonomy and responsibility; the fantastic, then, appeals to our clandestine fascination with heteronomy and irresponsibility. As far as *Frankenstein* is concerned, we might momentarily indulge in the modern Prometheus' satanic pride – but we might also experience a cathartic release from the dangerous ambitions that he carries out.

Abstract

Der Mythos ist ein möglicher Faktor des Phantastischen, da das, wovon er erzählt, zur unmöglichen Welt des Übernatürlichen gehört: Wer so argumentiert, subsumiert den Mythos unter logische Kategorien, die ihm fremd sind. Sein 'phantastisches' Potential erschliesst sich nur, wenn man seine semiotische Eigengesetzlichkeit anerkennt. Ausgehend von dieser Einsicht wird im vorliegenden Artikel die Frage erörtert, was geschieht, wenn Mythos in Phantastik übergeht. Dabei dient die Adaptation des Prometheus-Mythos in Mary Shelleys *Frankenstein* als Beispiel. Die Anspielungen auf den antiken Mythos, die sich in dem Roman nachweisen lassen, leisten einer mythisierenden Wahrnehmung der fiktionalen Wirklichkeit Vorschub, die mit der gleichzeitig ins Spiel gebrachten psychologischen oder ethischen Beurteilung derselben Wirklichkeit konkurriert; die Simultaneität der heteronomen und inkompatiblen Sichtweisen erzeugt eine irreduzible semantische Spannung, die das Phantastische von Mary Shelleys 'modernem' Prometheus ausmacht. In anderen zeitgenössischen Adaptationen desselben Mythos (Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Leopardi) löst sich hingegen die Spannung, indem der Mythos in Allegorie übergeht.