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FRANKENSTEIN: FROM A GOTHIC NOVEL TO A MYTH ABOUT THE HUMAN CONDITION

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This paper focuses on the reception of *Frankenstein* in order to trace the transition from its reading as a Gothic story in the early nineteenth century to our contemporary awareness that this is a myth about the human condition. The essay begins by outlining the primary reactions to the anonymously published novel in 1818 and its dramatisation staged in 1823. It then goes on to contrast those to the political commentaries in the foreword accompanying the first Bulgarian translation of the text (1981) and to the interpretative spin offered by twenty-first-century adaptations of *Frankenstein* for the stage.

***Key words*:** Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, reception, Gothic

The conception of *Frankenstein* dates back to June 1816 – author Mary Shelley was 18 years old. Confined to the Villa Diodati in Geneva with her company because of the weather, she took Lord Byron's challenge very seriously: in an attempt to entertain everyone, the host had been reading ghost stories to the party and he laid down the gauntlet when he announced a competition for the most frightful tale; in her 1831 Introduction to *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley recalled, "I busied myself to *think of a story*, – a story to rival those which had excited us to this task. One that would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature, and awaken thrilling horror – one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood and quicken the beatings of the heart" (Shelley 1994: 7-8). Thus, it all started with a bit of histrionics, the intellectual and emotional energies of Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Shelley, Claire Clairmont, Lord Byron and Dr Polidori thrown together for days on end, with candles needed in daytime and constant thunder and lightening for special effects at the backdrop of the Geneva Lake. This paper relies on the dynamics between text and performance, in order to contrast the early nineteenth century interpretation of *Frankenstein* as a Gothic story to the late twentieth-, early

twenty-first-century reception of it in Bulgaria (conditioned by a global change of sensibility) as a myth about the human condition.

Anonymously published in January 1818, *Frankenstein* did not go unnoticed. Nineteenth-century reviewers inevitably offered an outline of the plot. In narrating the story for the readers of *Blackwood's*, Scott calls the Creature an "animated monster" and a "hideous demon" (Scott 1818: 617). Consistently, Frankenstein's creation is referred to as a "monster" in *The Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany* (1818), in *Bell's Court and Fashionable Magazine* (1818), in *The Literary Panorama, and National Register* (1818), in *The Quarterly Review* (1818), etc. This was Percy Shelley's perspective on the text, prioritising the scientist, a fellow Romantic creator; in Peter Ackroyd's *Casebook of Victor Frankenstein*, the poet says: "The great experimenters are poets in their way. They are travelers in unknown realms. They explore the limits of the world" (Ackroyd 2008: 252), a variation on the ideas expressed in Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*. Mary's ambivalence on the topic of Romantic genius is revealed through the plot: her protagonist is deheroicised, while his Creature is worthy of sympathy; the former is not the sole author of the latter's story, there are the two tales from two different points of view, and there is the framing narrative of Robert Walton, an arctic explorer who writes letters to his sister and who presents the two accounts to the audience. To add to this, Mary never refers to the created as "monster" and "demon", these are Frankenstein's labels readily adopted by critics and readers along with the disgust he feels. Thus, *The British Critic* reviewer is in the minority when expressing compassion towards the Creature: "yet, in spite of all his enormities, we think the monster, a very pitiable and ill-used monster, and are much inclined to join in his request, and ask Frankenstein to make him a wife" (*British Critic* 1818: 436).

The reviewers did not approve of *Frankenstein*. The narrative was not life-like enough, the horror exceeded their forbearance, and to some it was sheer blasphemy. *The Quarterly Review* critic set out to ironically demonstrate "what a tissue of horrible and disgusting absurdity this work presents" (Croker 1818: 382). Among the more generous in its criticism was *The Edinburgh Magazine* (1818: 253). The attitude of the reviewer evokes the biblical plea, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (KJV 1984, Luke 23: 34). In Florence Marshall's *Life & Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* (1889), the importance of public opinion is highlighted in the form of feedback from friends and relatives: "At the Bagni di Lucca, where they settled themselves for a time, Mary heard from her father of the review of *Frankenstein* in the *Quarterly*. Peacock had

reported it to be unfavourable, so it was probably a relief to find that the reviewers 'did not pretend to find anything blasphemous in the story'" (Marshall 1889: vol. I, 215-216). The Gothic origins of the novel were in the centre of attention, whether this was seen as a clash with religion, as a departure from reality, or a philosophical endeavour.

Due to the Gothic or in spite of it, it did not take long for *Frankenstein* to catch the imagination of the general public. As Godwin wrote to his daughter, "*Frankenstein* is universally known, and though it can never be a book for vulgar reading, is everywhere respected" (Marshall 1889: vol. II, 68-69). In 1823 Richard Brinsley Peake turned it into a play in three acts entitled "Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein" and staged it at the Theatre Royal, English Opera House, Strand. Mary attended one of the performances (on 29th Aug. 1823) and wrote about it to Leigh Hunt: "But lo and behold! I found myself famous. *Frankenstein* had prodigious success as a drama, and was about to be repeated, for the twenty-third night, at the English Opera House. The play-bill amused me extremely, for, in the list of *dramatis personæ*, came '------, by Mr. T. Cooke'. This nameless mode of naming the unnameable is rather good" (Marshall 1889: vol. II, 95). Fame had not happened overnight as with Byron upon the publication of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, but five years after the anonymous publication in 1818 the new edition of the novel in 1823 had her name on the title page.

Mary Shelley's impressions of the play are symptomatic of the afterlife of her work: "The story is not well managed, but Cooke played ------'s part extremely well; his seeking, as it were, for support; his trying to grasp at the sounds he heard; all, indeed, he does was well imagined and executed. I was much amused, and it appeared to excite a breathless eagerness in the audience." (Marshall 1889: vol. II, 95) Critiquing Peake's play of 1823, all were unanimous that "the acting was very grand" (*London Morning Post* 1823a: 4) but not everyone appreciated the plot or the morality behind it: *The London Morning Post* published two reviews in two consecutive days, exemplifying the range between dismissal and admiration. In the first one, the anonymous reviewer voiced the objections rehearsed by the critics of the novel: the Gothic was a problem (*London Morning Post* 1823a: 4). This was followed up by a celebration of the pleasure that the performance had afforded to another critic (*London Morning Post* 1823b: 4). A powerful Romantic myth was thus constructed at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Initially inscribed into Gothicism, it was dismissed as one of those "frantic novels". Between then and now, numerous adaptations (theatrical as well as cinematic) have taken

liberties with the story or even related it without words in a silent film version (1910) or a ballet (2016). Celebrated variations such as Milner's melodrama for the Royal Coburg Theatre (1826) and Whale's silver-screen interpretation (1931) deserve their own research. Yet, the interest *Frankenstein* provoked did not reach academia until the 1970s when, according to David Fishelov, feminist discussions of literature, the rise of bio-engineering and the interest in marginal voices and Otherness changed perceptions (Fishelov 2016: 7). Such processes were not limited to the English-speaking world and influenced the international reception of the novel: *Frankenstein* was translated into Russian in 1965.

The first Bulgarian translation of the text took place in 1981. It was rendered by Zhechka Georgieva for the *Narodna kultura* publishing house and based on the revised edition of 1831. The foreword provided in the publication was not really about the author, neither was it about the two existing versions of the novel, or about the translator's choices, for that matter. Written by journalist and translator Dimitri Ivanov, it boldly maps literary heritage onto the political and social contemporariness of the early 1980s: "Frankenstein, who tried to strangle his creator last century, has now grabbed Mao's shadow by the neck" (Ivanov 1981)[1]. The reader has hardly had time to consider that Frankenstein is the creator rather than the creation when thrown onto the political arena: having opened his commentary with monster talk, is Dimitri Ivanov claiming that the Chinese Communist Party is a monster attempting to destroy the reputation of its first leader? Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci has already pointed out that "the traveler arriving in Peking today has an almost physical feeling of change. No uniforms, no written slogans, and the portraits of Mao Tse-tung are so rare that I only saw three of them" (Fallaci 1980). In reply, Deng Xiaoping gives the official line of his government, "Chairman Mao committed mistakes: It is true. But he also was one of the main founders of the Chinese Communist Party and of the People's Republic of China. In evaluating his mistakes as well as his merits, we think that his mistakes only rate a secondary place" (Fallaci 1980). The political provocation in the foreword is left for the Bulgarian readers to figure out as Ivanov turns to psychology and then redirects readers' attention to Robert Ardrey's *African Genesis* (1961). His selective synopsis of Ardrey's argument validates fear as key to evolution, which justifies the translation of a text that may otherwise be censored as irrelevant or worthless because it evokes fear – after all, ever since those first reviews, *Frankenstein* has been

[1] The translation of quotations from Bulgarian sources is mine, V. K.

considered in terms of horror. Particularly interested in the political afterlife of Mary Shelley's novel, Ivanov goes on to note, "the world press released a photograph of the Great Helmsman under the heading that Maoism has created his Frankenstein", and a little bit later, "the neutron bomb was also nicknamed Frankenstein – like the monster that assailed its creator" (Ivanov 1981). By now informed readers have had enough of what they can only perceive as a misrepresentation of the characters: after all, Frankenstein is the creator rather than the creation. And yet, Ivanov refers to the creature as audiences might, revealing the afterlife of the myth. According to researcher Anne Mellor, "Victor has become his creature, his creature has become his maker; they are each other's double. Hence naming the creature 'Frankenstein' – as popular folklore would have it – uncovers a profound truth within the novel's narrative" (Mellor 2003: 23). Certainly, another aspect of the discourse used in the foreword has to do with the use of the word "monster" – Victor does refer to his creation as a monster but is it acceptable for readers and critics to espouse the label? To quote Mellor again, "Mary Shelley wants to endorse what we would call nowadays 'the ethic of care' […]; she wants us to see that when the nurturing love of a mother is absent, that's when monsters get made" (Mellor 2003: 23-24). The Bulgarian observer adopts Victor's attitude the way the general public has adopted it – thus, in a journalistic style, he touches upon the perception of Frankenstein in the popular imagination, mapping it onto the realm of political commentaries.

Ivanov's next move is to sketch out the biography and the personality of the author and he draws upon the authority of Richard Holmes to provide details that depict her as a martyr whose patience, intelligence, romantic love and loyalty are worth celebrating for her own sake rather than in her husband's name. It is a defence against her detractors, playing with and overturning the fairy-tale like heading of the foreword, "Fear and little Mary". When it comes to genre, Ivanov dismisses the "Gothic novel" label and brands *Frankenstein* "a philosophical comedy cross-dressed as a phantasmagorical nightmare" instead. The Romantic practice of mixing up fact and fiction, probability and improbability, reality and imagination is thus half acknowledged, and the Gothic is no longer the central issue.

To facilitate wrapping up his rhapsody, Ivanov brings into focus the interpretative core of *Frankenstein* and spells it out for the reader to bear in mind: "Mistakes occur with Frankenstein. Who can tell why but there has been a mix-up – the world named him after his maker, perceived him as a monster. At the same time he was a tragic figure: no human being, he was

more human than his maker" (Ivanov 1981). The binary opposition revolving around humanity has been central for Mary Shelley scholars. Mellor's analysis elaborates on the dialectic with a focus on the reader: "Mary Shelley suggests that if we concur with her characters in reading the creature as a monster, then we write the creature as a monster and become ourselves the authors of evil… In her novel, Victor Frankenstein literally becomes the monster he linguistically constructs" (Mellor 2003: 23). Another interpretative thread in the foreword reconnects literature and contemporary society hinting at the undead: "If you think he died in the flames of that mill, you are wrong. Today Frankenstein is preoccupied with military planning. With politics" (Ivanov 1981). Thus, we have come full circle back to the political. Whether planting these allusions meant challenging those in power or demonstrated a privileged position of being safe, or both, it is difficult to say. Certainly Georgi Tsankov avoided such hints five years later, in 1986, when he wrote the foreword for a tome of Gothic novels, including *Frankenstein*, even if he echoed the biographical and literary comments made by Ivanov. The Bulgarian press, however, picked up the gauntlet and Frankenstenian allusions have been part of political commentaries for decades.

With the publication of the Bulgarian translation of the novel, accompanied by Ivanov's foreword, the importation of *Frankenstein* was strictly textual and its uses were politicised. The advent of performances was delayed until the new millennium when in 2012 the *Sfumato* theatre workshop staged their *Frankenstein*, co-written by Annie Vasseva and Boyan Manchev: the Bulgarian playwrights meant to establish a link with the original rather than with the twentieth-century popular-culture versions of it and, yet, their text bears no resemblance with Mary Shelley's except in terms of general structure (Teatral Now 2012). At a press conference Manchev evoked Sophocles' lines in Antigone, "Many things cause terror and wonder, yet nothing // is more terrifying and wonderful than man" (Sophocles 1998) so as to emphasise the blending of magnificence and monstrosity in human nature; the ambiguity associated with both the creature and the creator was the starting point for this production (Teatral Now 2012). There is no narrative in Vasseva and Manchev's play, it falls back on binary oppositions: the living as opposed to the dead, organic and inorganic matter, the genius vs. his alter ego… To accommodate this mirroring of contraries the authors have also referenced the myth of Pandora and have split both her and Frankenstein into four physical representations on stage, Pan and Dora, as well as Frank and Stein. In Violeta Decheva's phrase, "unremittingly, the dialogue between them is

ironically overturned into a monologue, and then the monologue becomes a dialogue between images and figures, without the actors as much as touching each other" (Decheva 2012). The play is rather unconventional, "a theatrical oratory" in Manchev's definition (Teatral Now 2012), with no story to tell and no roles for the actors to play, with messages reduced to the coexistence of concepts, a starting point for any perceptively philosophising mind.

The avant-garde performance was still part of the *Sfumato* repertoire in 2014, advertised by the Information Centre of the Ministry of Defence. It cast a long shadow into 2018 when the Small Season Festival at *Sfumato* accommodated the Italian pantomime *Victor*, inspired by Mary Shelley's novel and produced by the Dispensa-Barzotti Company in Parma, which topped the list of nominations at the end of the forum. In 2016 the Covent Garden ballet interpretation of *Frankenstein* was shown on the big screen in Sofia, in the Arena Cinema on 6th, 9th and 10th July. The initiative echoed the National Theatre Live project that exports performances worldwide. A significant title in the NTL list was the *Frankenstein* theatre production, directed by Danny Boyle, broadcast live in the Cinema City (Mall of Sofia) on 8th June 2012. Attracting audiences with its inspired presentation, as well as with the award-winning play of actors Jonny Lee Miller and Benedict Cumberbatch, who alternate the roles of Victor and the Creature, the play is based on Nick Dear's script. It was this script (translated by Tatiana Ivanova) that caught the eye of director Stayko Murdzhev for his spectacular staging of *Frankenstein* at the Sofia Theatre in 2017. After the curtain is raised, the Creature emerges out of darkness, out of the mass of bodies reminiscent of corpses and embryos – Kameliya Nikolova's analytical overview of the new production celebrates Marina Raychinova's scenography, which translates the textual into a visual correlative (Nikolova 2017: 8) and gets her an Askeer award in 2018. Irina Gigova, on the other hand, reads the slanting surface of the stage as a representation of danger, with the entire story being on the edge (Gigova 2017). The clash between good and evil is seen through the power of love or its absence. None of these performances prioritises the Gothic – though it is inevitably there, the focus is on the precariousness of being human.

In the world of the early nineteenth century, dominated by religion as it was, the reception of *Frankenstein* focused on reconciling the story with the paradigm of Christianity. Because of the apparent incompatibility of its godless universe with a religious predisposition, the novel was either dismissed as blasphemous or appreciated for its entertainment value, and so were its early stage versions and spin-offs. The emancipation of the

Frankenstein metaphor set in motion the process of establishing a myth that had encapsulated a message or two. As it turned out, the least didactic of authors provided a lesson for twentieth- and twenty-first-century audiences. The Bulgarian reception (confined to the last four decades) has not been hampered by religion, which means that the readers' delight and their instruction go hand in hand. On the one hand, the absence of a Gothic tradition in the Bulgarian context stamps the experiences of reading translations of the novel or watching theatre productions based on it. On the other hand, the current Anglophone preoccupation with Frankenstein is much more informed by the political and existential concerns of our contemporary world than by a paradigm of Gothicism. This inevitably has an impact on its reception around the globe and reinforces the re-evaluation of Mary Shelley's story as a myth about the human condition.

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