

«FEARLESS THEREFORE POWERFUL»  
SOCIABILITY AND EMOTIONS IN MARY SHELLEY'S  
FRANKENSTEIN

Cristina Paoletti  
Università di Bologna, Dipartimento di Filosofia, paoletti@philo.unibo.it

Abstract. «Fearless therefore Powerful». Sociability and Emotions in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein

This paper analyses the role played by fear as the motive of both Victor Frankenstein and his monster's behaviour. Moving from the natural horror the monster excites, fear is mostly considered by Mary Shelley as a normal reaction, and its absence marks pathological circumstances, such as cruelty or unsympathetic and antisocial feelings. Referring to the philosophical debate on moral sympathy and to the scientific discussion on Erasmus Darwin's account of animal instincts, Shelley also provided remarkable criticisms

*Keywords: Enlightenment, Emotions, English Literature, Seventeenth Century.*

So should young SYMPATHY, in  
female form,  
Climb the tall rock, spectatress of the  
storm;  
Life's sinking wrecks with secret sighs  
deplore,  
And bleed for others' woes, Herself on  
shore;  
To friendless Virtue, gasping on the  
strand,

Cristina Paoletti

Bare her warm heart, her virgin arms  
expand<sup>1</sup>.

An essay on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* might perhaps appear an obvious choice when dealing with fear and its literary and artistic representations. Victor Frankenstein's odd and shocking story was firstly received with dismay and disappointment and an early reviewer explained the terror produced by the novel with the folly of the author.

The [author's] dreams of insanity are embodied in the strong and striking language of the insane, and the author, notwithstanding the rationality of his preface, often leaves us in doubt whether he is not as mad as his hero. Mr. Godwin is the patriarch of a literary family, whose chief skill is in delineating the wanderings of the intellect, and which strangely delights in the most afflicting and humiliating of human miseries. His disciples are a kind of *out-pensioners of Bedlam*, and, like 'Mad Bess' or 'Mad Tom', are occasionally visited with paroxysms of genius and fits of expression, which make sober-minded people wonder and shudder<sup>2</sup>

William Godwin was in fact the notorious radical philosopher who contributed with his *Enquiry concerning Political Justice* to the development of Utilitarian philosophy. Godwin was also Mary Shelley's father, and her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, was one of the rare eighteenth-century female philosophers, an advocate of women rights and a supporter of the French Revolution. As the only child of the most radical couple of the British Enlightenment, the talented Mary Shelley published a series of short children stories when she was eleven and was admitted to her father's intellectual circle, where she had the chance to meet scientists including Humphry Davy and William Nicholson, and

---

<sup>1</sup> E. Darwin, *The Botanic Garden*, I, 461-466.

<sup>2</sup> (J.W. Croker), *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, «Quarterly Review», XXXVI, 1818, pp. 379-85; quotation at p. 382.

«Fearless therefore Powerful»

poets such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Percy Shelley, who was later to become Mary's husband. While her stepsisters were sent to school, Mary receive no formal education (a choice she often lamented) and Godwin's circle and library were the only means of her instruction. Although her learning was mostly derived from private reading, Mary built up an impressive philosophical and literary knowledge, by which she created the insightful image of the natural philosopher Victor Frankenstein.

While Frankenstein's bold experiments shocked early readers and were connected to the author's radical *milieu*, fear, as Walter Scott noted, was not the central issue of the novel:

the author's principal object, [was] less to produce an effect by means of the marvels of the narrations, than to open new trains and channels of thought, by placing men in supposed situations of an extraordinary and preternatural character, and then describing the mode of feeling and conduct which they are most likely to adopt<sup>3</sup>.

Victor Frankenstein's story is a case study aimed at analysing humans' behaviour and reactions to new and unexpected challenges. As a result, fear and terror are mostly used in the novel to describe human nature, as they are normal effects deriving from the appearance of an artificially-created monster: the reanimation of dead bodies was in fact a hotly debated issue in early nineteenth-century scientific discussion and was to spark Mary Shelley's inquiry into human feelings. As Percy Shelley wrote in the *Preface* to the first edition,

---

<sup>3</sup> ([W. Scott], *Remarks on Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus; A novel*, «Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine», II, 1818, pp. 611-20, quotation at p. 614; on Mary Shelley's challenges to common sense and rational analysis see M.R. Morgan, *Frankenstein's Singular Events: Inductive Reasoning, Narrative Technique and Generic Classification*, «Romanticism on the Net», XLIV, 2006.

[*Frankenstein*] was recommended by the novelty of the situations which it develops, and however impossible as a physical fact, affords a point of view to the imagination for the delineating of human passions more comprehensive and commanding than any which the ordinary relations of existing events can afford<sup>4</sup>.

Following Scott and Shelley's advice, fear will be analysed as a *natural* human reaction and it will be connected to both scientific debate on instincts and philosophical discussion on the role of passions in the pursuit of virtue and happiness.

1. «*A spark of life*»

Most of Frankenstein's troubles derive from his creature's monstrous appearance. The monster is not wicked, but it is frustrated by the continual aversion it receives from men. It becomes impious and immoral because of its exclusion from human society and, because of its resentment, it begins killing and cheating. It is an unhappy and wretched being because it is unable to have normal relationships with humans:

Where were my friends and relations? No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed with smiles and caresses; or, if they had, all my past life was now a blot, a blind vacancy in which I distinguished nothing. [...] I had never yet seen a being resembling me or who claimed any intercourse with me. What was I? The question again recurred, to be answered only with groans<sup>5</sup>.

The monster is terrifying, even if it is not aggressive and is sometimes helpful to society: when it rescues a drowning child, men run away without appreciating its merit. The only man who speaks to it kindly is

---

<sup>4</sup> M. Shelley, *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, London, Penguin, 1994, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., pp. 116-17.

«Fearless therefore Powerful»

the elder De Lacey, the father of the family the monster observes for months. A blind man, De Lacey is willing to hear the monster and is not suspicious about the creature's words:

I have good dispositions; my life has been hitherto harmless and in some degree beneficial; but a fatal prejudice clouds [men's] eyes, and where they ought to see a feeling and kind friend, they behold only a detestable monster<sup>6</sup>.

In the first part of its 'life', the creature is actually the victim of prejudice and its sentiments are misunderstood: it is offended and emarginated, but it is guilty of no crime. Only a few people should be able to judge it candidly: Victor Frankenstein (but he is the first to fly when the creature acquires life), the elder De Lacey, Robert Walton (the young explorer who meets the monster only after hearing Victor's story), and, as Anne Mellor suggests, the reader<sup>7</sup>.

Mary Shelley presents the creature as a deformed being<sup>8</sup>, but it is not naturally immoral nor dangerous to other men. Its wickedness is not innate and is acquired after being rejected by society; it depends on the fear and aversion its hideous appearance excites. Thus, the monster's story may appear as evidence of the fact that human society corrupts what is originally perfect and virtuous, a statement that Mary Shelley

---

<sup>6</sup> M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., p. 129.

<sup>7</sup> A. Mellor, *Mary Shelley. Her Life, Her Fictions, Her Monsters*, London, Routledge, 1988, pp. 129-30.

<sup>8</sup> «His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of pearly whiteness; but this luxuriance only form a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips» (M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., p. 55). Victor is unable to create a normal being: «As the minuteness of the parts formed a great hindrance to my speed, I resolved, contrary to my first intention, to make the being of a gigantic stature» (M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., p. 51).

might have found in Rousseau's *Émile*<sup>9</sup>. *Émile* is recorded among the books read by the Shelleys in 1815 and Mary had encountered Rousseau's name in Mary Wollstonecraft's books, where Rousseau is bitterly criticised for the model of female education proposed in the fifth book of *Émile*. Rousseau's influence may also be found in the impressive description of the Alps and their effect of both calming and elevating Victor's mind<sup>10</sup>. Despite historical and textual evidence of Mary Shelley's acquaintance with Rousseau's thought, some aspects of *Frankenstein*'s story are inconsistent with Rousseauian philosophy, among them, the role played by society in human life and education.

*Émile* is educated without friends: his tutor, Jean-Jacques, directs each of *Émile*'s activities, addressing him to situations he can understand. This close relationship between pupil and tutor was necessary as, Rousseau affirmed, a child should meet only those problems he can face alone, and the tutor chooses adequate situations for the effective intellectual skills of his pupil. The result is an artificial world where children should be brought up: pupils are remote from adults and other children in order to encounter only what which the tutor had arranged for them. In fact, *Émile* would meet the real human society only as an adult and still with Jean-Jacques.

Mary Shelley did not accept this model: the creature 'receives' a sound and correct education because it can observe the real world. Glimpsing De Lacey's from its hovel, the creature learns to speak and read French

---

<sup>9</sup> «Tout est bien, sortant des mains de l'auteur des choses: tout dégénère entre les mains de l'homme» (J.-J. Rousseau, *Émile*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris, Pléiade, vol. IV, p. 245); Rousseau's influence on *Frankenstein* has been affirmed by A. Mellor, *Mary Shelley*, cit., pp. 47-49. Mary Shelley refers to Rousseau in a letter dated 1816, during the journey to Switzerland in which *Frankenstein* was firstly conceived (see *The Life and Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, London, Bentley, 1889, vol. I, pp. 123 and 135-36).

<sup>10</sup> See M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., pp. 90-94.

«Fearless therefore Powerful»

and acquires a basic grounding in history and science<sup>11</sup>. More importantly, the creature discovers the existence of sympathetic feelings:

[De Lacey] smiled with such a kindness and affection that I felt sensations of a peculiar and over-powering nature; they were a mixture of pain and pleasure, such as I had never before experienced, either from hunger or cold, warm or food; and I withdrew from the window, unable to bear these emotions<sup>12</sup>.

Observing men, the creature has the chance to recognise its own emotions. It immediately understands De Lacey's sentiments and immediately sympathises with him. According to Shelley, society is not a danger or a possible occasion for moral corruption: on the contrary, it is a necessary complement to a complete education because it allows children to experience and be aware of emotions. While *Émile* is brought up away from society as a calculated choice, the monster is forced to live alone: it wishes to leave its hovel, to develop its social instinct and to receive sympathetic feelings. This is the only way, it says, to be happy:

Sometimes I allowed my thoughts, unchecked by reason, to ramble in fields of Paradise, and dared to fancy amiable and lovely creatures

---

<sup>11</sup> As Scott noted, this is an unreal description of the acquisition of knowledge: «The ideas of the author are always clearly as well as forcibly expressed; and his descriptions of landscapes have in them the choice requisites of truth, freshness, precision, and beauty. The self-education of the monster, considering the slender opportunities of acquiring knowledge that he possessed, we have already noticed as improbable and overstrained. That he should have not only learned to speak, but to read, and, for aught we know, to write -- that he should have become acquainted with Werter, with Plutarch's Lives, and with Paradise Lost, by listening through a hole in a wall, seems as unlikely as that he should have acquired, in the same way, the problems of Euclid, or the art of book-keeping by single and double entry» ([W. Scott], *Remarks on Frankenstein*, cit., p. 619).

<sup>12</sup> M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., pp. 103-104.

Cristina Paoletti

sympathizing with my feelings and cheering my gloom; their angelic countenances breathed smiles of consolation. But it was all a dream<sup>13</sup>.

Society plays a similar role in Victor's life as well. As a student at the German university of Ingolstadt, he works hard on his experiments and forgets his family in Geneva.

No one can conceive the variety of feeling which bore me onwards, like a hurricane, in the first enthusiasm of success. 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 [...] I knew well [...] what would be my father's feelings, but I could not tear my thoughts from my employment, loathsome in itself, but which had taken an irresistible hold of my imagination. I wish, as it were, to procrastinate all that related to my feelings of affection until the great object, which swallowed up every habit of my nature, should be completed<sup>14</sup>.

Victor gives up writing and communicating regularly with his family, although he is aware that his father is worried and astonished. The success of his experiments becomes Victor's obsession and is the cause also of nervousness and slow fever. Victor is restored by the arrival of his friend Henry Clerval:

Nothing could equal my delight on seeing Clerval: his presence brought back to my thoughts my father, Elisabeth, and all those scenes of home so dear to my recollection. I grasped his hand, and in a moment forgot my horror and misfortune. I felt suddenly and for the first time during many months, calm and serene joy<sup>15</sup>.

---

<sup>13</sup> M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., p. 126.

<sup>14</sup> M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., pp. 51 and 53.

<sup>15</sup> M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., pp. 57-58.

«Fearless therefore Powerful»

Clerval's support is a crucial factor in Victor's recovery: the result of his experiment scares Victor, who falls ill and then gets well thanks to Clerval's assistance and friendship. Victor had created the monster giving it «a spark of life», but he is also given a new life as a result of Clerval's care. Mary Shelley seems to suggest a parallel role - *Doppelgänger*, as it was called referring to Gothic novels - between the biological process by which Victor animates dead organs and the vitality he gains after Clerval's arrival<sup>16</sup>. While Victor is successful in producing animal life, he needs help and friendship to keep his heart alive.

The close relationship between society, sympathetic affections and happiness is confirmed in the final pages of the book. Victor is an old and sick man, he has lost his friends and relatives and his only purpose in life is to kill the monster. The monster-hunting is his new obsession, and revenge his main motivation. After his wife's murder, he had sworn «to pursue the daemon who caused this misery, until he or I shall perish in mortal conflict. For this purpose I shall preserve my life»<sup>17</sup>.

Out of a desire for revenge, the monster killed Victor's brother, wife and friend and Victor became an emarginated man, without friends and or social connections. Victor's life is now analogous to the monster's condition. More importantly, Victor thinks and feels monstrously, in other words, he is indifferent to other men's desires and feelings. In fact Victor suggests that Walton should not interrupt his exploration to the North Pole, even if their ship continually risks being «immured in ice»<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the 'animal life' Victor recreates in the monster see par. 2. Mary Shelley's scientific background has been widely analysed; among others, see P. Fara, *Sympathetic Attraction. Magnetic Practices, Beliefs and Symbolism in Eighteenth-Century England*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996 and S. Curran, *The Scientific Grounding of Frankenstein*, in L.M. Crisafulli, G. Silvani (eds.) *Mary versus Mary*, Napoli, Liguori, 2001, pp. 257-66.

<sup>17</sup> M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., p. 196.

<sup>18</sup> «Are you then so easily turned from your design? Did you not call this a glorious expedition? And wherefore was it glorious? Not because the way was smooth and placid as a southern sea, but because it was full of dangers and terror, because at every

and in spite of the danger the sailors and Walton face. Although Victor had enjoyed friends and relatives' love, he is now as dry and cold as the monster. Frankenstein's (acquired) lack of sympathy is not the result of the corruption of society - as Rousseau would affirm - but derives from the desire for revenge and isolation from humans. Like his creature, he is a victim of society's mores.

## 2. *Social feelings and instincts*

Even though Victor is not a wicked man, he is jointly responsible for the monster's murders, inasmuch as he fails to give his creature the parental care a 'new-born' being needs. The monster is forced into solitude firstly by its author, and solitude is the main cause of wretchedness:

My vices are the children of a forced solitude that I abhor, and my virtues will necessarily arise when I live in communion with an equal. I shall feel the affections of a sensitive being and become linked to the chain of existence and events from which I am now excluded<sup>19</sup>.

The monster needs social connections in order to feel sympathetic affections from men. Mary Shelley suggests a sort of genealogy of happiness and virtue: they can thrive only in a community of men, since, as Lord Shaftesbury had affirmed more than a century earlier, sociability is a natural instinct:

If any *Appetite* or *Sense* be natural, the *Sense of Fellowship* is the same. [...] Besides the Pleasures found in social Entertainment, Language, and Discourse, there is so apparent a Necessity for continuing this good

---

new incident your fortitude was to be called forth and your courage exhibited, because danger and death surrounded it, and these you were to brave to overcome» (M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., p. 207).

<sup>19</sup> M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., pp. 142-43.

«Fearless therefore Powerful»

Correspondency and Union, that to have no *Sense* or Feeling of this kind, no Love of *Country*, *Community* or any thing *in common*, wou'd be the same as to be insensible even of the plainest Means of *Self-Preservation*, and most necessary condition of *Self-Enjoyment*<sup>20</sup>.

Shaftesbury exalted sociability not only because individuals gain material advantage from society, but also because society is the origin of most human passions and pleasures. Shaftesbury's philosophy inspired a *topos* of eighteenth-century British literature: the *man of feeling*, or polite gentleman whose virtue is acquired through the cultivation of innate, benevolent, and social tendencies. However, Shaftesbury's model was also widely challenged and criticism was familiar to Mary Shelley.

Firstly, Mary Wollstonecraft refuted the literary image of woman as a being furnished with 'sharp sensibility and delicate temper' and therefore devoid of reason. Wollstonecraft complained that sensibility and sociability were believed to be the only guide a woman was capable of following in the pursuit of virtue. Moreover, the idea of 'female' virtue was remarkably different from the male standard and consisted mainly in frivolous behaviour and coquettishness<sup>21</sup>. Mary Shelley does not wish to reproduce in the monster the literary image of female sensibility that

---

<sup>20</sup> Lord Shaftesbury, *Sensus Communis. An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour*, (1709), in *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, Gregg Publishers, Farnborough, 1968, vol. I, pp. 110-11; on *sociability*, the natural instinct founding Shaftesbury's moral theory, see I. Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England 1660-1780*, Vol. II, *Shaftesbury to Hume*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000 and M. Gill, *Hume's Progressive View of Human Nature*, «Hume Studies», XXVI, 2000, pp. 87-108.

<sup>21</sup> «anxious to render my sex more respectable members of society, I shall try to avoid that flowery diction which has slid from essays into novels, and from novels into familiar letters and conversation. These pretty superlatives, dropping glibly from the tongue, vitiate the taste, and create a kind of sickly delicacy that turns away from simple unadorned truth; and a deluge of false sentiments and overstretched feelings, stifling the natural emotions of the heart, render the domestic pleasures insipid, that ought to sweeten the exercise of those severe duties, which educate a rational and immortal being for a nobler field of action» (Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, London, Johnson, 1792, p. 9).

Mary Wollstonecraft criticised: the creature does not ask for superficial and vain human connections. On the contrary, the monster aims to exploit its benevolent affections through social connections and this is why it needs friendship and sympathetic feelings. The statement that the pursuit of virtue requires the exchange and consonance of feelings - that is, that sympathy is the origin of virtue - echoed Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it<sup>22</sup>.

As moral discernment depends on *feeling*, Smith affirms, virtue can be recognised by placing oneself in other men's position and imagining their sentiments. When observing human behaviour and checking that observer and observed have corresponding feelings, a natural approbation arises and this sentiment is a sign that observed actions are virtuous. Therefore, according to Smith, society is the occasion for both exerting natural social tendencies and understanding virtue and vice. Without society, virtue is a meaningless name and natural benevolent tendencies wane.

Smith affirmed that sympathy, benevolence and moral sentiments are natural, inasmuch as they are universally part of human nature. Mary Shelley may have other arguments for thinking them natural and she was likely to be referring to a particular theory of animal life. In fact, she probably accepted the standard view on 'sensibility' as the faculty of perceiving both external objects and moral sentiments and referred its origin to the nervous system. While moral philosophers such as

---

<sup>22</sup> A. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie, in the *Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 1982, vol. I, p. 36.

«Fearless therefore Powerful»

Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and Smith thought of moral sense as a perception of the mind, Samuel Johnson explained the delicacy of temper as the «weakness of [physical] constitution» or «tenderness [and] scrupulousness» that mark great and irresistible passions, such as the love for one's native country<sup>23</sup>. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* explained more clearly that

SENSIBILITY is a nice and delicate perception of pleasure and pain, beauty or deformity. It is very nearly allied to taste; and, as far as it is natural, seems to depend upon the organization of the nervous system<sup>24</sup>.

In this entry, it was pointed out the correspondence between taste and moral sense and their improvement through education. The author probably had in mind eighteenth-century medical theories which stressed on the nervous system as the common origin of life and intellectual faculty. William Cullen, among others, argued that nerves and muscles were filled by a 'nervous fluid', which he also thought the cause of so-called spontaneous operations of animal bodies and their reactions to stimuli. 'Sensibility' was consequences of the slow or rapid motions of the nervous fluid:

We have hinted already, that the functions of the *sensorium commune* are fundamental in the system. It is connected with the extremities of the nerves every where, so that by an impression made upon certain of these extremities, a motion is propagated from thence to the sensorium; in consequence of which, a sensation arises; and, by sensations arising in

---

<sup>23</sup> S. Johnson, *Dictionary of English Language*, London, Strahan, 1755, vol. I, sub voce *Delicacy*.

<sup>24</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Edinburgh, Bell, 1810, sub voce *Sensibility*. As no medical explanation is present in the entry *Sense*, it may be concluded that, in the popularised views of science, perception of external objects was considered mainly an act of the mind, while moral sense and taste had a more direct relation with the nervous system.

the sensorium, a motion is propagated from hence to certain extremities connected with muscular fibres, whereby these are excited to contraction. Those parts of the body upon which impressions made give occasion to sensation, are said to be sensible<sup>25</sup>.

John Brown, one of Cullen's pupils, interpreted the tendency to motion of the nervous fluid as a proof of the existence of nervous power, that is a particular quantity of energy in the nervous system<sup>26</sup>. Erasmus Darwin, educated at the University of Edinburgh and follower of Brown's medical theory, borrowed the definition of nervous power and extended it to animal functions, passions and intellectual faculties. Repetition and imitation, Darwin affirmed, are the main principles of life: they correspond to particular motion or transformation of the nervous fluid. Therefore learning, comprehension of language (including natural language), dreams, illness, vital functions and reactions to stimuli can all be considered particular cases of repetition or reproduction of the same nervous motion in different parts of the body<sup>27</sup>. Darwin also

---

<sup>25</sup> W. Cullen, *Lectures on the Materia Medica*, London, Lowndes, 1773, p. 6. Although this definition might seem clear at first glance, Cullen's account of sensibility is quite problematic, since (as Cullen himself admitted) no anatomical observation confirmed the existence of a nervous fluid and it should be explained its intercourse with the soul. On these strictures, see R.K. French, *Ether and Physiology*, in G.N. Cantor, M.J.S. Hodge (eds.), *Conceptions of Ether. Studies in the History of Ether Theories 1740-1900*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 111-34 and J.P. Wright, *Metaphysics and Physiology. Mind, Body and the Animal Oeconomy in Eighteenth-Century Scotland*, in M.A. Stewart (ed.), *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1990, pp. 251-301. On the crucial role played by Cullen and his predecessor at the Edinburgh Faculty of Medicine, Robert Whytt, see G. Rousseau, 'Brainomania': *Brain, Mind, and Soul in the Long Eighteenth Century*, «British Journal for the Eighteenth-Century Study», XXX, 2007, pp. 161-91.

<sup>26</sup> J. Brown, *Elementa Medicinae*, Edinburgh, Elliot, 1780; on the spreading of Brown's ideas see *Brunonianism in Britain and Europe*, in W.F. Bynum and R. Porter (eds.), London, Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 1988.

<sup>27</sup> «when any action presents itself to the view of a child, as of whetting a knife, or threading a needle, the parts of this action in respect of time, motion, figure, is imitated by a part of the retina of his eye; to perform this action therefore with his hands is easier to him than to invent any new action, because it consists in repeating with another set of fibres, viz. with the moving muscles, what he had just performed by

«Fearless therefore Powerful»

explained medical sympathy: while illness was localised in a particular organ, its effects can be found in the whole body or we can ourselves feel the pain we observe in others:

The effect of this powerful agent, imitation, in the moral world, is mentioned [...] as it is the foundation of all our intellectual sympathies with the pains and pleasures of others, and is in consequence the source of all our virtues. For in what consists our sympathy with the miseries, or with the joys, of our fellow creatures, but in an involuntary excitation of ideas in some measure similar or imitative of those, which we believe to exist in the minds of the persons, whom we commiserate or congratulate?<sup>28</sup>

While Smith meant sympathy as a mental experience by which moral judgement is inferred, Darwin thought it an organic phenomenon, gave a materialistic explanation and set it in all living organisms, plants included. Darwin himself quoted Smith's sympathy to confirm the importance of repetition and support his materialistic account of sympathy<sup>29</sup>. In any case, according to Darwin, moral sympathy is an animal faculty and is akin to vital operations, such as respiration and circulation of blood.

---

some parts of the retina; just as in dancing we transfer the times of motion from the actions of the auditory nerves to the muscles of the limbs. Imitation therefore consists of repetition» (E. Darwin, *Zoonomia, or The Laws of Organic Life*, London, Johnson, 1794-1796, I, XXII, 3.1).

<sup>28</sup> E. Darwin, *Zoonomia*, cit., I, XXII, 3.3. Aristotle gave a medical definition of sympathy as the complex series of reactions observed in the whole body when only an organ is damaged (*Problems*, Bk. V, 883A 11-21), for a history of the idea of sympathy, see A. Broadie, *Sympathy and the Impartial Spectator*, in K. Haakonssen (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 158-88.

<sup>29</sup> «From this our aptitude to imitation, arises what is generally understood by the word sympathy so well explained by Dr. Smith of Glasgow. Thus the appearance of a cheerful countenance gives us pleasure, and of a melancholy one makes us sorrowful. Yawning and sometimes vomiting are thus propagated by sympathy, and some people of delicate fibres, at the presence of a spectacle of misery, have felt pain in the same parts of their own bodies, that were diseased or mangled in the other» (E. Darwin, *Zoonomia*, cit., I, XVI, 7).

In the *Author's Introduction* (1831), Mary Shelley recalled the

conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley, to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener. During one of these, various philosophical doctrines were discussed, and among others the nature of the principle of life, and whether there was any probability of its ever being discovered and communicated. They talked of the experiment of Dr Darwin (I speak not of what the doctor really did, but, as more to my purpose, of what was then spoke of as having been done by him) who preserved a piece of vermicelli in a glass case till by some extraordinary means it began to move with voluntary motions<sup>30</sup>.

These words may be read as a proof of the popularisation of Galvanism, an issue widely discussed in nineteenth-century learned circles and societies, especially after Galvani's nephew, Giovanni Aldini, performed a public demonstration in London, applying electric charges to a dead body<sup>31</sup>; Mary Shelley may have been referred to this experiment when writing about «the spark of life» by which the creature is animated. Moreover, while a student at Oxford, Percy Shelley arranged a set of instruments for electrical experiments and he later read Humphrey Davy's *Discourse with Mary*<sup>32</sup>. Finally, William Lawrence, Godwin's disciple and Percy Shelley's doctor, was engaged in 1807 in a debate on animal powers with his former teacher John Abernethy<sup>33</sup>.

---

<sup>30</sup> M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., p. 8; Darwin is also quoted in Percy Shelley's *Preface* to the 1818 edition of *Frankenstein*. For a general account of Darwin's influence on early nineteenth-century literature see M. Priestman, *Romantic Atheism. Poetry and Freethought 1780-1830*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

<sup>31</sup> *An Account of the Experiments performed by J. Aldini on the Body of a Malefactor executed at Newgate Jan. 17<sup>th</sup> 1803*, London, Cuthell, 1803.

<sup>32</sup> H. Davy, *Discourse, Introductory to a Course of Lectures on Chemistry*, London, Johnson, 1802, recorded in a note dated October 28, 1816 (see *The Journals of Mary Shelley*, P.R. Feldman, D. Scott-Kilvert (eds.), London, John Hopkins University Press, 1987, p. 142).

<sup>33</sup> J.F. Blumenbach, *A Short System of Comparative Economy, translated from the German by W. Lawrence*, London, Longman, 1807 and W. Lawrence, *Lectures on Physiology, Zoology and*

«Fearless therefore Powerful»

Even though Mary Shelley was not a trained physician or a natural philosopher and although she had not described Victor's work minutely, she was no doubt familiar with a number of scientific experiments and her words confirm the wide popularisation of medical discussions on electro-physiology. It can therefore be assumed that she wrote about «the nature of the principle of life» implying its technical medical meaning: according to the common view – shared by many British physiologists - animal life results from the continual reactions to stimuli, and the nervous system is the most important part of the animal body as it is sensitive to stimuli. This account of animal economy is consistent with Frankenstein's creature: because of its «principle of life», it is a normal living being, but it is also a *sensitive* one, able to perceive both external objects and human sentiments. While, according to Smith, sympathy and sociability were a necessary requirement of a polite and perceptive moral being, Erasmus Darwin and Mary Shelley made them a natural and corporeal instinct.

3. *Fearless men and monsters*

The connection between virtue and emotion was a controversial issue in Mary's family, about which Godwin himself had discussed a notorious case study in his *Enquiry concerning Political Justice*. Suppose Abbé Fénelon's house is burning and his chambermaid can rescue just one person; according to Godwin, Fénelon is the person who should be saved because he is the author of works, such as *Thelemacus*, that had largely contributed to young people's education. This is the correct choice, even in the case that, in the burning house, one of the chambermaid's parents is asking for help. In fact, Godwin affirms,

---

*Natural History of Man*, London, Callow, 1819; for an insightful analysis of Lawrence's materialism on Mary Shelley, see R. Simili, *Una voce scientifica singolarmente audace*, in R. Simili (ed.) *Scienza a due voci*, Firenze, Olschki, 2006, pp. 111-63.

We are not connected with one or two percipient beings, but with a society, a nation, and in some sense with the whole family of mankind. Of consequence that life ought to be preferred which will be most conducive to general good<sup>34</sup>.

Godwin admits that gratitude and filial love are virtues, but they become a sort of second-order motives when compared with the pursuit of the 'general good'. The chambermaid, who should condemn her parent to death, is obviously reluctant to make this choice; according to Godwin, these contradictory sentiments are

owing to our confounding the disposition from which an action is chosen, with the action itself. The disposition, that would prefer virtue to vice, and a greater degree of virtue to a less, is undoubtedly a subject of approbation; the erroneous exercise of this disposition, by which a wrong object is selected, if unavoidable, is to be deplored, but can by no colouring and under no denomination be converted into right<sup>35</sup>.

Familial affections, along with friendship and social connections, are not a sound guide in moral judgement: even if natural human feelings, they mostly trouble the search for the 'general good'.

As it has been observed, familial love and human relationships had widely affected Victor Frankenstein's behaviour: he enjoyed familial care and his family happiness is the most important aim in his anguished moral reflections. In fact, when his servant, Justine Moritz, is unjustly prosecuted for William Frankenstein's murder, Victor is horrified by his

---

<sup>34</sup> W. Godwin, *Enquiry concerning Political Justice*, London, 1798 (photographic facsimile edited by F.E.L. Priestley, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1969), vol. I, p. 127.

<sup>35</sup> W. Godwin, *Enquiry*, cit., vol. I, p. 130. By contrast, Godwin accorded a positive role to sympathy in society, recognising that it creates strong emotional ties among men, and described sympathetic affections in his novels (see I. Ward, *A Man of Feeling: William Godwin's Romantic Embrace*, «Law and Literature», XVII, 2005, pp. 21-46).

«Fearless therefore Powerful»

creatures, sympathises with Justine's gloomy sentiments, and is worried about his family's grief:

And my father's woe and the desolation of that late so smiling home – all was the work of my thrice-accursed hands! Ye weep, unhappy ones, but these are not your last tears! Again shall you raise the funeral wail, and the sound of your lamentations shall again and again be heard! Frankenstein, your son, your kinsman, your early, much loved friend; he who would spend each vital drop of blood for your sakes – who has no thought nor sense of joy except as it is mirrored also in your dear countenances – who would fill the air with blessings and spend his life in serving you – he bids you weep – to shed countless tears; happy beyond his hopes, if thus inexorable fate be satisfied, and if destruction pause before the peace of the grave have succeeded to your sad torments!<sup>36</sup>

Frankenstein is scared by the monster's behaviour because of its consequences on his family: in Ingolstadt, Victor was frightened by the creature's appearance, but he is now aware of the possible ruin the monster's revenge can produce. In this case, Victor's apprehension naturally derives from his sound familial affections.

While he is mostly influenced by moral sentiments in the beginning of the novel, at the end of his life Victor appears indifferent and does not cite them in his account of his life:

During these last days I have been occupied in examining my past conduct; nor do I find it blameable. 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 another still paramount to that. My duties towards the beings

---

<sup>36</sup> M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., p. 85.

of my own species had greater claims to my attention because they included a greater proportion of happiness and misery<sup>37</sup>.

In Victor's self-representation, there is no room for emotions, but the reader knows that he was deeply anguished, recognising that he was responsible for his family's grief. After Victor lost his brother, father, wife and friend because of the monster, the appeal to the greatest happiness for human species sounds somewhat unreasonable and out of place. Moreover, it is further evidence of the complete identification between the old Victor and the monster: they are both cruel, indifferent to sympathetic feelings and excluded from human society. The calculus of the greatest happiness seems to mask his incapacity of being virtuous and benevolent. On the other hand, as he is cold and heartless, Victor can fulfil the hard task of hunting the monster throughout Europe. The following words, pronounced by the monster, may be extended also to Victor's sentiments:

Your hours will pass in dread and misery, and soon the bolt will fall which must ravish from you your happiness forever. Are you to be happy while I grovel in the intensity of my wretchedness? You can blast my other passions, but revenge remains - revenge, henceforth dearer than light or food! I may die, but first you, my tyrant and tormentor, shall curse the sun that gazes on your misery. Beware, for I am fearless and therefore powerful. I will watch with the wiliness of a snake, that I may sting with its venom<sup>38</sup>.

The lack of fear marks both Victor's and the monster's abnormal behaviour: fear may here be interpreted as one of the natural and necessary effects of sociability. In fact, 'fearless' is here synonymous with unconnected and emarginated, since it derives from isolation and also

---

<sup>37</sup> M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., p. 209.

<sup>38</sup> M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., pp. 162-63.

«Fearless therefore Powerful»

produces future exclusion from society: Victor's cold and arid behaviour is incompatible with virtue, and sympathy can hardly be replaced by the pursuit of utility.

4. *Conclusion*

Fear seems to play a crucial role in Victor's story: he is happy as long as he is worried about other people's happiness. Fear is part of that complex interchange of feelings and emotions, normally taking place in human society and allowing men to be virtuous. In *Frankenstein*, fear is somewhat akin to the Latin word *cura* and implies that men improve by caring for others. This account of fear and human nature derives from eighteenth-century philosophical discussions on moral sympathy and sociability, but was also confirmed by Darwin's medical theory. In fact, as sympathy was considered a strong physiological tendency, its disappearance ought to appear even more monstrous and pathological. Sociability and 'sensibility' emerge as the most important tracts of human nature, in which, as Percy Shelley wrote, virtue and vice originate:

Nor are the crimes and malevolence of the single Being, tho' indeed withering and tremendous, the offspring of any unaccountable propensity to evil, but flow inevitably from certain causes fully adequate to their production. They are the children, as it were, of Necessity and Human Nature. In this the direct moral of the book consists; and it is perhaps the most important, and of the most universal application, of any moral that can be enforced by example. Treat a person ill, and he will become wicked. Requite affection with scorn; - let one being be selected, for whatever cause, as the refuse of his kind - divide him, a social being, from society, and you impose upon him the irresistible obligations - malevolence and selfishness. It is thus that, too often in society, those who are best qualified to be its benefactors and its

ornaments, are branded by some accident with scorn, and changed, by neglect and solitude of heart, into a scourge and a curse<sup>39</sup>.

Yet, the notion of sympathetic virtue had been deeply affected by Mary's father and Mary tried perhaps to borrow from her mother's books a new account of 'moral affections'. In fact, while Mary Wollstonecraft rejected the literary image of the woman of sharp sensibility, she was not unaware of the impact of non-rational motives in moral judgement<sup>40</sup>. Imagination could in fact be defined

the true fire, stolen from heaven, to animate this cold creature of clay, producing all those fine sympathies that lead to rapture, rendering men social by expanding their hearts, instead of leaving them leisure to calculate how many comforts society affords<sup>41</sup>.

Mary Wollstonecraft referred to passions and imagination to explode Hobbes and Mandeville's egoistic descriptions of human nature. She agreed with Shaftesbury that sociability is a natural instinct and considered it a proof that personal material advantage is not the most influential motive of human actions. Victor and his creatures behave *unnaturally* when excluding social instincts. On the contrary, emotions and moral sentiments (among which fear is obviously included) may be considered as «the true fire, stolen from heaven» which Frankenstein, or *The Modern Prometheus*, should have granted his creature and mankind.

---

<sup>39</sup> [P.B. Shelley], *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, «Athenaeum», 10 November 1832, p. 730.

<sup>40</sup> While she developed a rationalistic account of moral judgement, Mary Wollstonecraft affirmed that passions are necessary to virtue; on this point, see K. Green, *The Passions and Imagination in Wollstonecraft's Theory Moral Judgement*, «Utilitas», IX, 1997, pp. 271-90.

<sup>41</sup> M. Wollstonecraft, *Letter XXIII, Paris 1794, September 22*, in *Letters to Imlay*, London, Kegan Paul, 1879, p. 59.