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I

This paper is part of a work in which I am analysing the romantic hero from several perspectives.¹ For today’s presentation, I have chosen to focus on the possibility of considering the romantic hero an abject hero. I will start by defining this hero as a monster and will then proceed approaching the concepts of monster and abject through an analysis that will include a reading on the heroes in *Quatrevingt-treize* (Victor Hugo, 1874), *Melmoth the Wanderer* (Charles Maturin, 1820), *Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte* (Adelbert von Chamisso, 1813), *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* (Mary Shelley, 1818), *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* (Alexandre Dumas, father, 1845), and *Faust I* (Goethe, 1808).

II

Lilian Furst² refers to the romantic hero as a figure who is not conceived with the intention of representing an ideal being and stresses the ambiguity that makes it difficult to draw the line that distinguishes the figure of the hero from that of the anti-hero.³ In fact, the romantic heroes reflect the paradoxical values assumed by the Romantic movement and consequently they both reflect some of the noblest moral

¹ Its characterization and construction; its relationship towards space (landscapes and interiors); and its relationship with the Other and with himself.

² Lilian Furst, “The Romantic Hero, or his he an Anti-Hero?” (London and Basingstoke: *The Contours of European Romanticism*, The Macmillan Press, Ltd, 1979), pp. 52-53.

³ Also Helena Buescu, “Hommes, machines et maladies: La conscience romanesque de l’homme au romantisme”, Hendrik van Gorp and Ulla Musarra-Schroeder (ed.), (*Studies in Comparative Literature 29 – Genres as Repositories of Cultural Memory* (sep.), Rodopi, Amsterdam & Atlanta, GA 2000), p. 555, in a reference to the romantic fictional individual, states that he is situated between the hero and the anti-hero.

values, such as the defence of the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. At the same time, they also present aspects that challenge the moral or excel in defying God, in an individualism that makes them act cruelly upon those who surround them and rebel against the values of society, which will eventually lead them to their outcasting.

Assuming a set of characteristics, both psychological and physical, that define them as different from the rest of the human beings, the romantic heroes are easily identified with the exceptional figure of the so-called monster. In fact, they are characters that we could define simply as excessive, since they are morally excessive. According to Aguiar e Silva,⁴ the romantic heroes are “haughty and dominating, relevant either in good or in evil” – but they are also physically excessive, because body and soul are indivisible and so moral excessiveness corresponds to the exceptional features of their monstrous bodies.

This exception allowed to the monster, whether by excess or fault, awakes curiosity and attracts the public eye. David Punter, in *Gothic Pathologies*,⁵ analyses the relation between the Law and the monster’s body in a way I think also valid to the study of the relation between the Law and the monster’s mind. The author states that the Law is a means of creating a pattern for the body, and that it rejects the exceptional body. Therefore, before the Law there are no monsters, since they would put the Law at stake. Nevertheless, according to Punter, it is this threat to the Law that attracts us to the monster, because it undoes the discourse of the Law, even if not permanently, and suggests that we don’t have to live imprisoned, that we can save ourselves, even if that salvation implies our death. The author considers that there is a dialectic relationship between reader and monster that makes the latter attractive.⁶ José Gil⁷ points out the

⁴*A estrutura do romance* (sep. de *Teoria da Literatura*), (Coimbra: Livraria Almedina, 1974), p.20.

⁵*Gothic Pathologies. The Text, The Body and The Law* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1998), pp. 43-62.

⁶ David Punter, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

frequently established relation between the word monster and *monstrare* ("to show") and to the fact that this association is not due to the act of showing repeatedly but, on the contrary, because it is only done in exceptional situations. In fact, being rare, monsters are seldom seen, and this is a reason why they are a target to the curious eye and a source of fascination to those who are part of the so-called normality. The monster is therefore the one who shows his difference and who, by revealing an "overabundance of reality" and an "excess of presence", becomes suitable for representation.⁸ It is as individuals who show this excess of presence that I consider Peter Schlemihl, Frankenstein/ the creature, Dantès, Melmoth, Faust and Cimourdain as monsters. We cannot, however, ignore the fact that we are facing "monsters" that are very different from each other, belonging to sub-categories of that wider category.

The monstrous figure always has its origin in an act of transgression. As it is said by José Gil,⁹ the monster is the visible proof of the mother's culpability or, if we understand "mother" as the being that gives him life, it is the visible proof of the culpability of his creator, because the monster's creation is not restricted to natural conception and birth,¹⁰ nor is this the most common situation as far as romantic monsters are concerned. Their origin is the consequence of an act that is symbolically counter-nature and counter-culture.¹¹ The monster can result from the hideous act of a man that assumes the father's role,¹² as in the case of Frankenstein; from the terrible acts of a group or society, as in the cases of Cimourdain and Dantès; or yet from the

⁷ José Gil, *Monstros* (Lisboa: Quetzal, 1994), p. 77.

⁸ Idem, *ibidem.*, pp.78-81.

⁹ Idem, *ibidem.*, p. 94.

¹⁰ Sílvia Quinteiro, "Monstros: criação ou mo(n)stração?", (*dos Algarves, Revista da Escola Superior de Gestão, Hotelaria e Turismo*, 6, 2000), pp. 28-29.

¹¹ José Gil, *op.cit.*, pp. 94-95.

¹² See also Maria Aline Ferreira, "Reprodução, Abjecção e Desejo em *Frankenstein*" (*Anglo-Saxónica, Revista do Centro de Estudos Anglisticos da Universidade de Lisboa*, Série II- N.ºs 2 e 3, 1996), pp. 92-97.

weakness of the character himself that gives his soul to a satanic entity aiming at obtaining certain benefits, as in the cases of Faust, Peter Schlemihl and Melmoth.

Because of their transgressive origin and nature, monsters are irreproducible figures and the impossibility of repeating or reproducing themselves definitely makes them asocial individuals and outcasts.¹³

III

The whole set of exceptional and uncommon features that characterizes these singular heroes is the cause of fascination and abjection. In fact, it is the sum of these characteristics that makes the romantic hero emerge at the same time as an object of attraction and an object of repulse. Therefore we are then before a kind of hero that fits Julia Kristeva's¹⁴ definition of the abject, which is, an hero that is attractive because he is repulsive, and the more repulse he causes, the more attractive he becomes. Being excessive and exceptional, the monstrous hero is the unclean and improper element that society attempts to eliminate. Society – that I here refer to as the clean and proper self/element – rejects, expels and excludes the inadequate, the dirty, the corporeal disorder and the anti-social.¹⁵ Both subject and society, endeavour to achieve a stainless identity, a perfect identity, which places the undesirable aspects out of sight. This is a process of removal that fits Kristeva's concept of abjection, casting aside with the primordial multiplicity that prevents to the emerging of a coherent (individual or social) identity, and throwing the self under an external authority “that works to socialize the

¹³ David Punter, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

¹⁴ *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection*, (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1980), pp. 9-39.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Gross, “The Body of Signification”, John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (eds), *Abjection, Melancholia and Love: the work of Julia Kristeva*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 86.

emergent self within a system that denies the multiplicity [...]”.¹⁶ However, by trying to discard what is abject in itself/himself, society and subject are creating a provisional and therefore unstable identity. In effect, refusing something that is part of the self and trying to permanently remove something that can be repressed and concealed, but never eradicated, causes an interior fragmentation and a fragile identity that are to be found both in the monstrous heroes and in the society they *belong to*.

In the cases of the heroes in question, repulse has to do with moral issues - with the rejection or acceptance of the heroes’s behaviours in *Quatrevingt-treize*, *Faust I*, and *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* -, and with physical issues coupled to moral issues - as in *Melmoth the Wanderer*, *Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte* and *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*. In these last three cases, physical rarity/deformation emerges as a sign of moral transgression. So, we can see that Melmoth’s extraordinary powers, like Schlemihl’s (as well as the fact that Schlemihl has no shadow), are evidences of their pacts with the devil which, in the case of Edmond Dantès, are implicit. In *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*, however, and even though the underlying principle is the same and physical deformation exposes a moral deformation, the approach is more elaborate: Victor shows his moral distortion by projecting it in his creation’s deformed body. According to Jerrold Hogle,¹⁷ Frankenstein’s creature (as in other creature/Creator relations) is the site reserved to that which Victor wants to liberate himself from, his moral distortion. The monstrous creature exhibits in his body the multiplicity that Victor tries to veil. In fact, in the process of collecting human remains to create a new life that he intends coherent, the creator decomposes himself becoming a fragment - “Sometimes I grew alarmed at the wreck I perceived I had

¹⁶ Jerrold Hogle “*Frankenstein* as neo-gothic: from the ghost of the counterfeit to the monster of abjection”, Tilottama Rajan and Julia M. Wright (eds.), *Romanticism, history, and the possibilities of genre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 204.

¹⁷ Idem, *ibidem.*, p. 195.

become”¹⁸ – and revealing an abject part of him that is finally exposed in its totality the moment he looks at his creation for the first time and sees a reflection of his own soul:

“His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of pearly whiteness; but these luxuriations only formed 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.” (Shelley, [1818] 1992: 56)

The process of creating is after all a process of showing: the exhibition of what exists but should not be shown, the *uncanny*.¹⁹ Meaningfully, the creature’s skin is not represented as a layer that makes the body look uniform, but as a transparency through which the multiplicity of the creature’s interior, should not, but can be observed. Everything is shamelessly revealed, the most intimate (physical and psychological) aspects. The creature exhibits all its horror and even what might be considered as a synonym of perfection, like the “*teeth of pearly whiteness*” and the black lustrous hair, ends up being a means to emphasize the horror of incoherence: the white teeth contrast with the black lips, the black hair falls over a non-asian yellow skin and “*dun-white*” “*watery eyes*”. The tremendous multiplicity and total disconnection of the elements that compose this figure are thus evident, and so is the absolute failure of Victor’s attempt to represent a perfect being. Therefore, we realize that the creature is not the synonym of throwing off the abject element, but a disclosure of everything that Victor rejects, his abject/monstrous self, what in him cannot be reduced to a coherent unity inside a system. The creature’s monstrosity exists in the sense that this figure embodies and distances everything that in Victor and in the creature itself is *abjected* by the

¹⁸ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (London: Penguin Books, [1818] 1992), p. 55.

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny”, Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory: an anthology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, [1919] 1998), p. 166.

Western culture.²⁰

The monstrous heroes are hence elements whose difference and extraordinary marks make them unspeakable, unclassifiable, inassimilable alterities that fit the symptom of the abject described by Julia Kristeva:

“*Le symptôme*: un Langage, déclarant forfait, structure dans le corps un étranger inassimilable, monstre [...]” (Kristeva, 1980: 19)

Society is incapable of absorbing these heroes, but it is also incapable of eliminating them and, according to Kristeva, it is the recognition of the impossibility of excluding the threatening and anti-social elements that produce the sensation and the attitude this author defines as abjection.²¹ The set of malformations that characterizes these heroes makes them simultaneously appealing and repulsive, owners of a fascination that Kristeva claims to be an attribute of the abject. The romantic heroes, being abject subjects use this feature on their victims, making them submissive and voluntary.²² In fact, this appeal is a constant feature of the romantic heroes. They are figures that cannot be observed with indifference, they are enchanting and revolting, source of extreme hatred and affection, or maybe of a mixture of both. These unexplainably linked characteristics are translated in the expression villain-hero that is generally used to designate the romantic hero: because if on one hand they produce a feeling of abhorrence due to their criminal acts, on the other hand they inevitably fascinate everybody around them, and even the reader, leading us to believe that they are victims in their fictional world.²³ Independently from the Other's will or reason, the attraction towards the abject hero (which is also an attraction towards the abyss) is unavoidable.

It is then important to make a distinction between two situations in which the

²⁰ Jerrold Hogle, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

²¹ Elizabeth Gross, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

²² Julia Kristeva, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

²³ Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries. English Literature and its Background 1760-1830*, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press), p. 161.

abject arises: when the hero recognizes his own abject side and tries to suppress it, and when the hero is himself the abject element of a society that struggles to eradicate him. That is the case in *Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte*, where Mina, although terrified since the first time she saw Schlemihl,²⁴ could not avoid a love that would end by (un)willingly leading her to disgrace. In *Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte*, like in *Faust I*, for example, the abject doesn't exist simply linked to the hero's figure, but also to his relation towards other abject elements - in Schlemihl's case, his relation towards gold and towards the devil. In a passage referring the way he related to his wealth, Schlemihl expresses himself in terms of attraction/repulse, as if he was talking about sex – gold is here something that he desires and possesses in a sexual way (with lust), and that he afterwards rejects:

“So verging der Tag, der Abend; ich schloß meine Tür nicht auf, die Nacht fand mich liegend auf dem Golde, und darauf übermannte mich der Schlaf. [...] Ich stieß von mir mit Unwillen und Überdruß dieses Gold, an dem ich kurz vorher mein törichtes Herz gesättigt [...]” (Chamisso, [1813] 1980: 25-26)

A relation that reflects Schlemihl's relation with himself (his interior fragmentation) and the way he faces, not only the disturbing and unclean gold, but also the one from whom he has received it. In fact, abjection defines his experience when he observes the man in gray/the devil. Schlemihl feels incapable of avoiding to look at a figure that he cannot tolerate:

“[S]o ward mir doch seine blasse Erscheinung, von der ich kein Auge abwenden konnte, so schauerlich, daß ich sie nicht länger ertragen konnte.” (Chamisso, [1813] 1980: 21)

But in *Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte* the connection between gold and

²⁴ Adelbert Chamisso, *Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte*, (Frankfurt und Leipzig: Insel Verlag, [1813] 1980), p. 27.

abjection goes beyond the protagonist's feelings. As a matter of fact, there is another face of this object, similar to the one it has in *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo*: money is here the object that makes part of the hero's dominating fascination possible. It is wealth that enchants the ones around the hero to a point that their faculties become partially suspended, but also, and in great measure, it is money as well that makes them pretend not to notice the hero's physical and/or psychological strangeness and the difference, or even his transgressive behaviours and lies. Indeed, it is gold that transforms an individual that without it would simply be repulsive, into an attractive one to whom everybody willingly submits. Wealth fascinates and buys, and just like any other abject element it exposes - in this cases it is an evidence of the hypocrisy and forged morality that preside over society's construction of the clean and proper self.

This fascination, which we can relate to Edmund Burke's definition of "astonishment",²⁵ results from the subject's exceptionality and from his exposure – the exposure of a deformed uniqueness. In fact, Burke's definition of the sublime experience is very similar to what the individual experiments when facing the abject: the frozen faculties and the suspension of the self. What makes these heroes seductive and fearsome is hence this irregular singularity (the suspicious that something obscure has marked their past and still accompanies them) together with a short disclosure that is just enough to arise curiosity and interest and to avoid the possibility of turning one's back on it. In Cimourdain's case, the hero's attraction results from allying the obscurity of his past to a present severe and unsounded personality. Nevertheless, Cimourdain's attraction isn't caused simply by his secrecy and deviance from the current social values, but also, and essentially, by all the mystery surrounding his absolute strictness

²⁵ "The passion produced by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other [...]" (Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (London: Basil Blackwell, [1757] 1990), p. 57).

and unusual sense of justice. Indeed, what really fascinates us about Cimourdain is observing how far he can take his extreme and conflicting passions for justice and for Gauvain. In fact, these two passions are elements that the hero would have to expel or repress in order to achieve a coherent identity, and the inability of doing so leads Cimourdain to an unavoidable death.

Like Cimourdain, Melmoth is also a figure that arouses the curiosity of those who observe him as if he was a dangerous, fearsome, but absolutely irresistible abyss. The mystery involving Melmoth (like the one that involves Cimourdain and Edmond Dantès) makes all the attentions centre on him, even though he is a terrifying figure, or maybe for that reason. The same society that tries to suppress the hero cannot avoid being fascinated by him.

To conclude, I would like to stress the idea that the monstrous hero is more than a figuration of physical and moral disorder or inadequacy of the Self. In fact, this irregular figure is also a representation of society's inability of building an identity that is permanently coherent. He is therefore an abject hero, one that *abjects* part of himself and who is partially *abjected* by the society he belongs to.