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Victor Frankenstein's Evil Genius: Plutarch,  
Brutus's Vision, and the Absent Revolution

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**Abstract** – This essay examines the influence of Plutarch's *Life of Brutus* on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, arguing that the relationship between Brutus and his «evil genius» provides Shelley with a model for characterizing the pair of Victor Frankenstein and his Creature. By considering the broader context of Plutarch's reception from the sixteenth through the early nineteenth centuries, and particularly the construction of Brutus as a ghost-seer, a clinical obsessive, or a revolutionary icon, the essay examines the Brutus/Victor parallel as actual and/or symbolic parricides, shedding new light on Shelley's failed representation of the French Revolution in her novel.

**Keywords** – Plutarch; Mary Shelley; *Frankenstein*; Ghosts; French Revolution.

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# Victor Frankenstein's Evil Genius: Plutarch, Brutus's Vision, and the Absent Revolution

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Les grands hommes de la Révolution furent les victimes de Plutarque.  
Jean Cocteau

## 1. Introduction

*Frankenstein*-related criticism could not ignore the influence of Plutarch on Mary Shelley's novel, if not for the fact that *Parallel Lives* is part of the Creature's education, teaching him the deeds of ancient heroes and the greatness and misery of human nature.<sup>1</sup> Still, when editing a most recent book on *Frankenstein and Its Classics*, Jesse Weiner, Benjamin Eldon Stevens, and Brett M. Rogers were forced to remark that, albeit being «the second-most prominent example, after Prometheus, of a Greco-Roman influence in *Frankenstein* – and the single most direct classical influence on the Creature himself», the case of Plutarch had been generally dismissed by scholars, and, moreover, almost exclusively analyzed in relation to the Creature's self-education (5-6).

A common reference in the political thought of the age of Mary Shelley, Plutarch is a recurring presence in her oeuvre. Arguably an early encounter, almost certainly due to the influence of William Godwin, Plutarch appears in Mary Shelley's reading list of 1815, as well as in the diaries of 1815-17 as the subject of her husband's reading, in the same months when the couple worked on the first draft of *Frankenstein* (6). «It is unclear», Weiner, Stevens, and Rogers write, «how much of Plutarch M[ary] W[ollstonecraft] S[helley] had read», although it should be noted that no substantial correction from Percy Shelley can be detected in relevant passages of the novel. It is also impossible to determine with precision which edition (or editions) the Shelleys actually read, in an age witnessing a massive presence of Plutarch's *Lives* – in the original Greek or in translation – in the European editorial market. In any case, the presence of Plutarch in *Frankenstein* deserves further exploration: alongside being a crucial influence in the construction of the Creature's social identity, the impact of *Lives* is also particularly strong in structural terms. Weiner, Stevens, and Rogers contend that Plutarch may have inspired the way Shelley creates echoes and symmetries between the existences of Robert Walton, Victor Frankenstein, and the Creature, with *Parallel Lives* «provid[ing] a template for *Frankenstein's* larger narrative structure, with repeated comparison or parallels» (9).

In this essay, I will propose the cross-reading of an episode of *Frankenstein* with a specific passage of Plutarch's *Life of Brutus*. My aim is threefold. First, I will show how Plutarch's influence is not limited to the Creature making general reference to *Parallel Lives*, and determines, at least in this particular case, a specific and detectable phenomenon of intertextual relationship so far undetected by scholarship. Second, I will analyze what this episode may tell us about Mary Shelley's characterization of Victor Frankenstein, highlighting how the parallel Victor/Brutus corresponds to specific choices in the construction of Victor's psychology. In pursuing this aim, I will also consider the role played by the *Life of Brutus* in the European debate

<sup>1</sup> In order to adhere more closely to Shelley's first concept of the novel, and also keeping in mind the considerations made by Anne K. Mellor (1990), I quote Mary Shelley's text from Robinson's edition her manuscript of 1816-17, without Percy Shelley's insertions and corrections.

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on ghosts from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. Third, I will examine the post-revolutionary implications of the Victor/Brutus pair in the name of actual or symbolic parricide, within the context of what Lynn Hunt terms the post-revolutionary «family romance».

### 2. The Omen

In the summer of 42 BC, Plutarch relates, the armies of Brutus and Cassius had been suffocating revolts in the East and were crossing the Dardanelles in order to face the armies of Anthony and Augustus: the final fight would take place a few months later, on the battlefield at Philippi. According to popular rumours [λέγεται], in that moment of instability and uncertainty Brutus had witnessed μέγα σημεῖον –literally «a powerful sign», but more correctly «a portentous omen» (Plutarch, *Life of Brutus* 36: 1).<sup>2</sup> «In the deepest hours of the night» [νύξ [...] βαθυτάτῃ] – Plutarch describes Brutus as a nighthawk, whose energies are entirely projected towards the war and who has managed to reduce sleep to a minimum – Brutus was meditating in his tent, while the rest of the army was sleeping. All of a sudden,

he felt as if someone was entering; he turns towards the opening of the tent and sees a terrible, monstrous apparition: an abnormal, terrifying being standing by him in silence [δεινὴν καὶ ἀλλόκοτον ὄψιν ἐκφύλου σώματος καὶ φοβεροῦ, σιωπῆ παρεστῶτος αὐτῷ]. Once he found the courage to speak, he asked: «Who are you, man or god? With what intention did you come here to us?» The phantom [τὸ φάσμα] replied in a deafened voice: «I am your evil genius [ὁ σὸς [...] δαίμων κακός], Brutus: you shall see me again at Philippi!» To which Brutus answered, unabashed: «Then I shall see you». (36, 6-7)

This episode is very famous in English-speaking countries, mostly because, in Thomas North's translation, it inspired a scene of William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (IV, 3). Although Shakespeare's rendering of action is altogether literal, there are some significant differences, the principal of which being Shakespeare's explicit identification of the δαίμων with Caesar's ghost: although Brutus initially questions the nature of the apparition – which must, however, be clear to audiences and was made explicit by stage directions (Greenblatt 182) –, he is later forced to admit that it was actually Caesar's shadow (Belsey). In promoting this association, Shakespeare's was following a trend that was common for the Elizabethan stage, as happens with the earlier, anonymous play *Caesar and Pompey, or Caesar's Revenge* (Pearson). The identification was certainly allowed by Plutarch's text, although the Greek term φάσμα (translated by North as 'spirit') denotes all kinds of visible apparitions, including illusions and phantasms of the mind, and not only the spirits of the dead: in any case, Shakespeare's interpretation of this episode does not account for a number of features characterizing the δαίμων κακός, and which are instead largely emphasized by Plutarch.

The apparition, Antonio Stramaglia notes, is described through four adjectives, disposed as a chiasmus: the first and fourth (δεινός and φοβερός) denote the fearful appearance of the figure, whereas the second and third (ἀλλόκοτος and ἐκφύλος) its monstrous, anomalous nature, whose defining trait is its abnormal height (Stramaglia 355 n. 9). The apparition's monstrosity is further stressed by its voice: Plutarch employs the verb ὑποφθέγγεται, meaning 'to reply' but with a specific phonic connotation, implicitly assimilating the figure's voice to the deafened sound produced by ventriloquists, or to the deep murmur uttered by other supernatural apparitions of the Greco-Roman corpus (355-56 n. 11). First and foremost, when asked about its nature, the apparition replies with a puzzling definition: ὁ σὸς δαίμων κακός does not

<sup>2</sup> I quote Plutarch's Greek text from the critical edition of *Vitae parallelae* established by Konrat Ziegler. All English translations, unless otherwise stated, are mine.

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seem to indicate the vengeful spirit of a dead person, but rather Brutus's own private demon, linked to his fate (τύχη) and, therefore, capable of prophesying future events that are the logical, natural consequence of Brutus's choices (356-57 n. 13). Plutarch, whose aim is to provide a more problematized and psychologically nuanced profile of Brutus, turns the idea of Caesar's ghost – most plausibly the object of the legend as it was circulating in his times – into the encounter of a man with his uncanny double: the emphasis on Brutus's imperturbable behaviour, influenced by Stoic philosophy, is paralleled by details – such as Brutus's lack of sleep, his mental tension, the dim light of the lamp, the silence of the night, and the absence of other witnesses – indirectly suggesting the possibility of mental delusion, by which Brutus gives external shape to his fears and guilt.

Let us confront Plutarch's passage with the chain of events taking place in Victor Frankenstein's cottage on the Orkney Islands, in chapter 12 of the second tome of Mary Shelley's originally planned two-volume novel. Victor is working on the Creature's female companion, but on one evening he reflects that his creation might be a curse for the entire human race. He decides, consequently, to destroy the work of his hands:

I trembled, and my heart failed within me, when, on looking up, I saw by the light of the moon, <that> the demon with a ghastly grin on his wrinkled lips, gazed on me as I sat. Yes, he had followed me in my travels . . . (Shelley, *Frankenstein. The original Two-Volume Novel* 374)

Once completed his task, Victor seeks his own apartment:

I was alone. None were near me to dissipate the gloom and relieve me from the most terrible reveries. Several hours passed and I remained near my window gazing on the sea. It was almost motionless for the winds were hushed & all nature reposed under the eye of the quiet moon . . . I felt the silence although I was hardly conscious of its extreme profundity until [sic] my ear was suddenly arrested by the paddling of oars near the shore and a person landed close to my house. In a few minutes after I heard the creaking of my door as if some one endeavoured to open it softly. [...] Presently I heard the sound of footsteps along the passage, my door opened & the wretch whom I dreaded appeared. Shutting the door he approached me & said in a smothered voice: – You have destroyed the work that you began . . . (375)

It would be needless, here, to recapitulate the dialogue between the Creature and his creator: let us just remind the chapter-closing sentence, uttered by the Creature once he finds that Victor is irremovable: «It is well, said he, I go; but remember! I shall be with you on your marriage night» (376).

Structural affinities are immediately evident: a young man in a profound state of mental distress; a silent night; a monstrous, gigantic Creature lurking in the shadow and entering, uninvited, the protagonist's apartment; a dialogue and a promise/prophesy (inexorably to be fulfilled) between two reciprocally interconnected characters, the one being the «evil genius» and δαίμων of the other. From this viewpoint, the whole relationship between Victor and the Creature might be a variation on the Plutarchian theme of the δαίμων κακός: the lexical choices made by Victor in order to describe the Creature throughout the novel – *dæmon, fiend, my vampire* – seem to corroborate this interpretation, which I will now explore in its broader cultural implications.

### 3. Demons and Fiends

As noted above, Plutarch's *Lives* was a common reference in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: the *Life of Brutus*, in particular, had become particularly popular since the

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French Revolution, in that it portrayed a tyrannicide in a light that, if not positive, was nonetheless based on a psychologically nuanced characterization. Voltaire's *La Mort de César*, originally of 1731, was repeatedly staged in French theatres during the Revolution, notwithstanding its original moral that the murder of tyrants does not prevent falling back into tyranny. Revolutionaries portrayed themselves as descendants of Brutus, and a bust of him was placed in the hall of the National Convention, together with those of other ancient republicans (Nippel 163-64).

The *Life of Brutus* also witnessed a more subterranean, yet pervasive afterlife in the debate on ghostly apparitions taking place all over Europe from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. This popularity was primarily due to the ambiguity created by Plutarch's stress on Brutus's mental tension, as well as by his providing a possible, rationalist explanation through a speech by Cassius, inspired by Epicurean philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Perceptions, Cassius explained, do not always account for reality, and imagination [φαντασία] is perfectly capable of creating vain images: this process normally happens to everyone when dreaming and, exceptionally, to those «fatigued bodies» which, such as Brutus's, «favour the wanderings of the mind by always keeping it on the alert» [τὸ σῶμα ταλαιπωρούμενον φύσει τὴν διάνοιαν αἰωρεῖ καὶ παρατρέπει] (*Life of Brutus* 37: 2-3). Finally, Cassius remarked, «we do not believe that demons exist, or that, if they do, they have the form, voice, and features of humans» [δαίμονας δ' οὐτ' εἶναι πιθανόν, οὐτ' ὄντας ἀνθρώπων ἔχειν εἶδος ἢ φωνὴν ἢ δύναμιν εἰς ἡμᾶς διήκουσαν] (37: 3). Brutus's later, actual death, would cast on the whole story the shadow of undecidability: Plutarch's version, in elaborating on a story that was probably circulating by word of mouth as a 'real' portent, created thus a peculiar feeling of ambiguity, making it impossible to determine its reliability.

Given the possibilities it opened for multiple interpretations, therefore, the episode of the δαίμων κακός, excerpted and proposed as a stand-alone anecdote in Renaissance commonplace collections, was repeatedly quoted and analysed in sixteenth-century treatises on the supernatural, in order to support the authors' different theories.<sup>4</sup> The principal and most widespread one asserted that the δαίμων was actually a demon or a creation of the devil. Such was the opinion of Calvinist pastor Ludwig Lavater, who, in his highly influential *De spectris*, published in Zurich in 1570 and later translated into French (1571), English (1572), and German (1586), maintained that apparitions – including that of Brutus's «malus genius» – are nothing but demons in disguise: the mention of Cassius's Epicureism, when relating Brutus's specific case, had the specific function of delegitimizing rationalist explanations (Lavater 68-69).<sup>5</sup> Lavater's demonological interpretation, already hinted in the works of Lutheran thinker Johann Wier, was shared, among others, by Calvinist humanist Benedictus Aretius and, most surprisingly, by ultra-Catholic Pierre Le Loyer as well as by Nicolas Remy, an active prosecutor of witches in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Lorraine.<sup>6</sup> Another Catholic author, Jean Bodin, in

<sup>3</sup> See Stramaglia 358-59 n. 18 for a contextualization of Cassius's speech within the canonical doctrine of Epicureism, which it seemingly contradicts.

<sup>4</sup> In the early sixteenth century, Battista Fregoso, known as Fulgus, composed a collection of anecdotes in vernacular Italian that has not survived, but whose Latin translation, published by Camillo Ghilini in 1509, was repeatedly reprinted in Paris (1518 and 1587), Basel (1541), Antwerp (1565), and Cologne (1604). The anecdote of Brutus was included in book I, ch. IV *De prodigijs* [Portents], leaf 20v.: the being is merely defined an *umbra* [shadow] and, when asked, he replies to be Brutus's *genius*.

<sup>5</sup> The English edition of Lavater's treatise (1572) might have been one of Shakespeare's sources for his portrayal of ghosts in *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*. Aretini convincingly contends that Lavater took the vast majority of his examples from Fregoso (72-73).

<sup>6</sup> Wier directly paraphrases the δαίμων's answer as «Diabolus sum, & spiritus malus» [I am a devil and an evil spirit] (70): by so doing, he was expressly expanding on his source, the *Exemplorum libri decem* by Sabellicus (1507), where δαίμων κακός was correctly translated as «malus Genius» (see Aretini 105-107,

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his *De la Démonomanie des sorciers* (1580), emphasized instead the personal connection of the δαίμων with Brutus, arguing that it might be some sort of evil counterpart of his guardian angel: alongside relying on Neoplatonic demonology, Bodin focused on the demon's height, comparing it to the multitude of tall and black evil spirits or witches' servants that could be found in ancient sources and witchcraft trials (Aretini 122-26). At the end of the sixteenth century, in his *Iconologia* (1593), Cesare Ripa precisely used Brutus's vision in order to provide an allegorical portrait of the *Genio cattivo*, i.e. the personal, evil demon assigned to everyone at birth and trying to divert them from the right path. Ripa's description can be of some interest for the readers of *Frankenstein*:

Huomo grande, nero, di volto spaventevole, con barba, e capelli lunghi, e neri, in mano tien un gufo. Scrive Plutarco, ch'apparve a Marco Bruto occisor di Cesare il genio cattivo in questa forma, e il gufo come stimavano l'antichi è ucello di trist'augurio . . . (Ripa 183 and Aretini 123 n. 51)

[Tall, black man, with a frightening look, with beard and long black hair, an owl in his hand. Plutarch writes that the evil genius appeared to Marcus Brutus, Caesar's murderer, in this shape, and the owl, according to the belief of the ancients, is a bird of bad omen]

More interesting for Mary Shelley's readers is a third strain in the interpretation of Brutus's vision, i.e. the tendency to explain it as a result of Brutus's melancholy disposition and perturbed state of mind. The German physician Kaspar Preucer established a connection between ghostly apparitions and psychological obsessions in his *Commentarius de praecipuis divinationum generibus*, of 1553, where Brutus's δαίμων is also mentioned (201). The illusory nature of the apparition is made explicit in Noël Taillepied's *Psychologie, ou Traité de l'apparition des esprits*, of 1588: the episode of Brutus is included among the cases of «les melancholiques & insensez» [melancholy and crazy] who «s'impriment en la fantasie beaucoup de visions, dont quelque fois il n'est rien» [impress many visions in their imagination, which sometimes are vain] (20). After reporting the opinion of Cassius, Taillepied summarizes the causes determining one's disposition to visions, several of which match Plutarch's description of Brutus: insomnia, sorrow, or lack of sense (20-22). This would be the dominant interpretation throughout the Enlightenment: we still find traces of it in the «medicalised explanations» characterising British publications on apparitions in the early nineteenth century, such as John Ferriar's famous *Essay towards a Theory of Apparitions*, of 1813 (Barry 208).<sup>7</sup>

making a detailed comparison of Plutarch's, Sabellicus's, and Wier's texts). Aretius sees Brutus's δαίμων as a very specific kind of demon, made of the same nature as dreams: it would belong to the category of φαντάσματα, i.e. «spectra vigilantibus obiecta, quae ut videntur spectra, ita revera quoque sunt. Non enim habent corpus nisi assumptum ad breve tempus, quo fallant homines, aut eis illudant, poenas fatales praesagiant. De Bruto nota est historia» [those spectres appearing to people who are awake, and which, although they seem to be spectres, are dreams nonetheless. They actually do not have a body, unless they take one for a short time, with which they do deceive humans or make fun of them by foreseeing fatalities. Bruto's story is well known] (416). In Le Loyer, 442-43, δαίμων κακός is translated as «mauvais Démon». Le Loyer also discusses Cassius's objections, arguing that imaginary ghosts are common with young people and disappear with age, which makes it unlikely that it might actually be Brutus's case (75-76). Similarly does Remy (Remigius 169).

<sup>7</sup> In Ferriar's essay, based on a paper of 1790, the episode of Brutus has evidently become a paradigmatic one: «It would be an endless task to ransack the pages of antiquity, for instances of this kind. The apparition of the Genius to Brutus, and of the Fury to Dion, cannot be doubted. We may be allowed, however, to enquire, whether the improved state of physiology affords any glimpse of light on this subject, and whether such extraordinary and terrific impressions cannot be explained, from the known laws of the animal œconomy, independent of supernatural causes, in the examples furnished by profane history» (14).

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By this time, however, also thanks to Shakespeare's mediation and the revolutionary idealization of Brutus, the character's supposedly altered state of mind had been heavily reframed within Romantic paradigms. Between the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century, authors such as Vittorio Alfieri, Stendhal, and Giacomo Leopardi testify to the transformation of Brutus into a fully accomplished Romantic anti-hero, characterized by obsessive vigilance, heroic defiance of fate, contempt of authority, and by a frenzied pursuit of already lost utopias, almost leading to delirium and to the sacrifice of all human relations. From this viewpoint, Victor Frankenstein is only one more literary incarnation of the Brutus type in the post-revolutionary age.

### 4. Illusions, Parricide, Revolution

Mary Shelley mentions «Brutus's dream» in an article of 1824, a strange piece lamenting the disappearance of the «true old-fashioned, foretelling, flitting, gliding ghost» (“On Ghosts” 253-54). “On Ghosts” is a eulogy for something that has disappeared. Exteriorly, it evokes with nostalgia the charming vagueness of ghost stories of old, in a decade witnessing increasing emphasis on the ‘accreditation’ of supernatural stories and a gradual shift towards a scientific approach to supernatural phenomena.<sup>8</sup> The fact that «Brutus's dream has become a deception of his over-heated brain», Shelley argues, or that «Lord Lyttelton's vision is called a cheat», are both symptoms of a loss affecting the modern, disenchanting world: «one by one» the ghosts of tradition «have been ejected from their immemorial seats» (253). Inwardly, however, the article is a mournful meditation on the summer of 1816, two years after the death of Percy Shelley: although Villa Diodati is never explicitly mentioned, almost all the materials composing the piece are derived from the discussions and the readings of the Genevan summer of eight years before.

As has been noted, for example, the list of types of «true old-fashioned ghosts» provided in the article of 1824 is mindful of the naïve spectres of *Fantasmagoriana*, the ghost-story anthology read at Villa Diodati, and heralds the summary of those stories Mary Shelley would draw, years later, in the introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* (Camilletti 2015).<sup>9</sup> In “On Ghosts”, the story of Brutus is coupled with that of Lord Lyttelton: indeed, they were two variants of the same narrative nucleus, i.e. that of a young man being foretold his imminent death by an apparition. Lord Lyttelton's story had been one of the most popular ghost stories of the late Georgian age and was still included in 1820s collections:<sup>10</sup> parallel anecdotes on his debauchery and divine punishment had flourished, and two of them were part of the ghost-story sylloge told by M. G. Lewis to the Diodati party in August 1816 (Shelley 2015: entry of 18 August [handwritten by Percy Bysshe Shelley]). All these narratives, in other words, had accompanied the genesis of Mary Shelley's own story, together with the reading of Plutarch:

<sup>8</sup> Just a year before Mary Shelley's article, there appeared T. M. Jarvis's edited collection *Accredited Ghost Stories* (1823). The volume inaugurated «a series of commercial publications» constellating the whole 1820s, «aimed at educated readerships who would be aware of the sceptical arguments of men like Ferriar but were still attracted to supernatural tales» (Barry 209).

<sup>9</sup> Compare e.g. «The returning bride, who claims the fidelity of her betrothed» (Shelley, “On Ghosts” 254) and «the History of the Inconstant Lover, who, when he thought to clasp the bride to whom he had pledged his vows, found himself in the arms of the pale ghost of her whom he had deserted» (Shelley, “Introduction [1831]” 354-55). The story in question was Friedrich August Schulze's “Die Todtenbraut”, translated in *Fantasmagoriana* as “La Morte fiancée”.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Jarvis 62-68, but also Welby 274-78, where doubts are cast on the story's reliability: «The [profligacy of Lord Lyttelton's manners] has induced many persons to suppose the apparition which he asserted he had seen, to have been the effect of a conscience quickened with remorse for innumerable vices and misgivings» (275).

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“On Ghosts” may, therefore, be read as a recapitulation of the ‘haunted summer’ of 1816, and at the same time as a precipitate – in a fully chemical understanding of this word – of the intellectual atmosphere surrounding the birth of *Frankenstein*. The mention of Brutus is not only the cultivated reference to a most famous episode of ancient history, but a clue signalling his central presence in the imaginary constellation of that creative moment.

After all, “On Ghosts” elaborates on a theme that is central in the ‘parallel lives’ outlined in *Frankenstein*: both Victor Frankenstein and Robert Walton are obsessed by the narrow space modern science allows to wonder, and both refuse the everyday, meticulous labour of scientists and geographers required by the age of disenchantment. Both have received their imprinting from distinctly untimely books, i.e. belonging to a former, pre-scientific age. Walton, lacking proper education, spent his childhood perusing the old-fashioned collection of travel books composing the library of his uncle, and including texts such as Richard Hakluyt’s *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1582) and Samuel Purchas’s *Purchas His Pilgrimes* (1625).<sup>11</sup> Young Frankenstein found some volumes containing the works of Cornelius Agrippa in a country inn, thus becoming an anachronistic eighteenth-century disciple of Albertus Magnus. The years at the university of Ingolstadt would not erase this initial input, but merely help him, as the novel’s follow-up would demonstrate, to achieve by scientific means the alchemical dream of banishing disease and death from the experience of human beings. The insistence on the influence of eighteenth-century scientific discoveries in the education of Victor Frankenstein should not make us forget that, in his contemptuous approach to the scientific method, he never fully becomes a scientist in the modern sense, and remains a sixteenth-century alchemist altogether: nowhere in the novel electricity is mentioned as the actual means of imparting life to the Creature, and the methodology followed by Victor has instead much in common with the practices of Renaissance alchemists (Muratori).

It might also be noteworthy that untimeliness was a key feature in Romantic reappropriations of Brutus, a revolutionary who had fought for an idea of state that was already defeated, in the name of the old virtues of the Roman world. In the same year as *Frankenstein*, Italian poet-philosopher Giacomo Leopardi drafted a long note in his journal, discussing the ways philosophical refinement and scientific development unavoidably destroy ‘illusions’, including the one of political freedom. From Leopardi’s point of view, rationalist philosophy inevitably leads towards tyranny, in that it unveils the groundlessness of every political ideal:

Cicerone era il predicatore delle illusioni. . . . sempre sta in persuadere i Romani a operare illusione, sempre l’esempio de’ maggiori, la gloria, la libertà, la patria, meglio la morte che il servizio [...]. Cicerone predicava indarno, non c’erano più le illusioni d’una volta, era venuta la ragione, non importava un fico la patria la gloria il vantaggio degli altri dei posteri ec. eran fatti egoisti, pesavano il proprio utile, consideravano quello che in un caso poteva succedere, non più ardore, non impeto, non grandezza d’animo, l’esempio de’ maggiori era una frivolezza in quei tempi tanto diversi: così perdettero la libertà, non si arrivò a conservare e difendere quello che pur Bruto per un avanzo d’illusioni aveva fatto, vennero gl’imperatori, crebbe la lussuria e l’ignavia, e poco dopo con tanto più filosofia, libri scienza esperienza storia, erano barbari. (Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, pp. 22-23 of the original manuscript [1818])

[Cicero was the advocate of illusions. . . . He is always seeking to persuade the Romans to act in pursuit of their illusions, always with the example of their forebears, glory, liberty, patriotism, death rather than servitude. [...] Cicero argued in vain, there were no longer the illusions of earlier times, reason had come, people didn’t give a fig about patriotism glory benefit to others to posterity, etc.; they had become egoists, they weighed the benefit to themselves, worried about what might happen, forgot boldness and drive, forgot greatness of spirit, the example of their forebears was a triviality in times so changed. And so they lost their freedom, they were unable

<sup>11</sup> These titles are not made explicit by the text, but are hypothesized by Klinger.



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to retain and defend what even Brutus had done out of a last vestige of illusion; the emperors came, lust and sloth increased, and shortly afterward, with so much more of philosophy, books, science, experience, history, they had become barbarous]

Subtler connections can be drawn between Brutus and Victor Frankenstein, the principal of which is the guilt of parricide. According to Plutarch, Brutus's mother had been Caesar's lover, so that Caesar could believe him to be his son; both Suetonius and Cassius Dio attest that Caesar, stabbed by Brutus, called him his son, and Dante places Brutus in hell, together with Cassius and Judas Iscariot, amongst those who murdered their benefactors. And although Victor does not materially kill his father – nor anyone in the novel – he nonetheless incessantly blames himself for being the true murderer of his friends and relatives, all killed by a Creature who is none but his shadow and *δαίμων κακός*. The problem of responsibility, as is well known, is central in *Frankenstein*: by analysing Victor's responsibility as a parent and a scientist, Josephine Johnston stresses how «Mary sharpens the point about the responsibility that we might owe to our creations», in all the possible understanding of this last term. Still, in addition to being a scientist and, in a sense, a parent, Victor Frankenstein is also a son: and the Creature's murders follow a clear trajectory «in terms of increasingly important relationships for Victor: a tie with a child, then with a peer, then with the closest male peer, then with the still closer female peer, and finally the ultimate bond with father» (Veeder 385). The fact that Alphonse Frankenstein, the peak and ultimate victim of this spree killing, is not actually murdered by anyone, paradoxically increases the Oedipal nature of his removal from the scene:

«An apoplectic fit was brought on». *By whom*, the sentence cannot admit. The question of responsibility, of agency, need not have come up, had not guilt at killing by indirection prompted the self-indicting Victor to forego the active construction («he died of an apoplectic fit») which would have acquitted him entirely.

Parricide, of course – be it direct or indirect; actual or symbolic – inevitably resonates with the historical context in which *Frankenstein* is written – the routes of post-Waterloo Europe between Switzerland, France, and England – and, first and foremost, with the history of the countries where the novel is set, i.e. Switzerland (and, to some extent, France, Germany, and the British isles) between 1772 and 1797, that is to say the twenty-five years of Victor Frankenstein's short, albeit densest life-span.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the time when Victor Frankenstein – «out of a last vestige of illusion» – performs his ambiguous parricide, is also the time when another equally symbolic parricide is taking place on a wider scale. As Lynn Hunt argues, the French Revolution could not help but possessing collective Oedipal resonances: «once the French had killed the king, who had been represented as the father of his people, what did they imagine themselves to be doing? What figure did they imagine to take his place? What was the structure of the new political unconscious that replaced the old one?» (Hunt xiv). That the Jacobins proposed Brutus as a model – a tyrannicide *and* a parricide – reinforces the idea of the Revolution as a collective killing of the Father in a Freudian sense: from this angle, it is certainly not incidental that, following Robinson's chronology, Victor decision of imparting

<sup>12</sup> The internal chronology of *Frankenstein*, as everyone knows, is highly problematic. Leonard Wolf declares it impossible to determine the exact years in which events take place (Shelley, *The Essential Frankenstein* 333-34). In his edition, Klinger proposes to date Walton's first letter to 1798 and to calculate the book's internal story on that basis, given that Walton quotes from Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which was precisely published on that year: still, *Frankenstein* also includes lines from Percy Shelley, so we should assume that, when it comes to poetry, Mary recurred to deliberate anachronism. More convincingly, Robinson dates Walton's first letter to 11 December 1796: from this date, we can easily surmise 1772 and 1797 as the dates of Victor's birth and death (note *ad loc.*).

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life to a dead body would date to 1791, and the 'birth' of the Creature to 1793, that is to say the year when Louis XVI was executed in Paris by the guillotine.

## 5. Conclusion: Alphonse Frankenstein's Impossible Walk

The connection between *Frankenstein* and the French Revolution is well known, and normally explained in allegorical terms. Mary Shelley's novel would allegorize the revolutionary attempt to build a 'new man', the monstrosity of privilege or – conversely – of the rising mob; or, again, the groundlessness of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's idyllic portrayal of the state of nature, which had inspired the Jacobins in their experiment at overthrowing existing social structures.<sup>13</sup> The underlying presence of the Revolution throughout the novel does not, however, explain the striking absence of it from the world of *Frankenstein*: nobody ever speaks of revolutionary troubles – not even the De Lacey family, although they came from France and must have been prosecuted by the revolutionary government –, nor do Victor and Clerval meet any sort of war-related circumstance in their travels across Europe, even if the areas they were crossing, such as the German banks of the Rhine, were war zones in all respects.<sup>14</sup>

There was something, however, which Victor Frankenstein could not ignore, and which Mary Shelley certainly did not: the spreading of the Revolution to Switzerland, whose epicentre was precisely Geneva. In December 1792, while the French army was fighting in nearby Savoy (and Victor Frankenstein was experimenting with corpses in Ingolstadt), the *Égaliseurs* – the Genevan party of democrats – overthrew the oligarchy running the city and established a philo-Jacobin government that assigned full sovereignty to the people: «[t]hree weeks sufficed to erase every trace of Geneva's ancient regime. The democrats annulled all Geneva's political edicts of the past century, including the ban on Rousseau and his books. [...] on 28 December, the insurrectionists instituted a provisional Comité de Sûreté Générale» (Israel 330). The revolutionary government would last until 1795; we should better report what happened in July 1794 in Mary Shelley's terms, from the *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* she and Percy Shelley published, anonymously, one year before *Frankenstein*:

To the south of the town is the promenade of the Genevese, a grassy plain planted with a few trees, and called Plainpalais. Here a small obelisk is erected to the glory of Rousseau, and here (such is the mutability of human life) the magistrates, the successors of those who exiled him from his native country, were shot by the populace during that revolution, which his writings mainly contributed to mature. . . . From respect to the memory of their predecessors, none of the present magistrates ever walk in Plainpalais. (Shelley and Shelley, *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*, 101-102)

None of these events leaves even the smallest trace in *Frankenstein*; furthermore, they are rather contradicted by the text. Let us just remember that the Frankenstein family is a most distinguished one in Geneva, and that Victor's father has been the incumbent of many roles of responsibility. And even if, by 1794, Alphonse had evidently resigned from all his incumbencies (which, however, did not prevent him from being an ideal candidate for being shot, as a visible emblem of the Old Regime), it is extremely unlikely that, on 28 May 1795, he could

<sup>13</sup> For a rapid overview of these approaches, see Shelley, *The Annotated Frankenstein* 37-38. Julia Douthwaite convincingly explores the connections between Shelley's novel, the revolutionary myth of the 'new man', and the artificial human body as a symbolic expression of revolutionary tensions.

<sup>14</sup> Just to make an example: «We staid a day at Manheim, on the fifth from our departure from Strasbourgh, arrived at Mayence. The course of the Rhine below Mayence becomes much more picturesque». According to the novel's internal chronology, we are in 1795-96: in those years, Mannheim and Mainz were contended by the French and Austrian armies.

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take a walk in a place filled with bad memories such as Plainpalais, which his peers designedly avoided:<sup>15</sup>

Last Thursday (May 28th) I, my niece, and your two brothers went to walk in Plainpalais. The evening was warm and serene, and we prolonged our walk farther than usual. It was already dusk before we thought of returning; and then we discovered that Ernest and William, who had gone on before, were not to be found. (Shelley, *Frankenstein. The original Two-Volume Novel* 291)<sup>16</sup>

Through Alphonse Frankenstein's impossible walk in Plainpalais, therefore, the reader is given a clue that the novel is taking place in a sort of different timeline, where something no less brutal and no less uncontrolled has taken the place of the revolutionary «bloodshed and injustice» (Shelley and Shelley, *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* 102): the place testifying to the atrocities of the Revolution, directed against city magistrates, becomes the theatre of the Creature's first murder, whose victim is tellingly a magistrate's son. Mary Shelley could not know the term, as it was only coined in 1857, but the first example of literary uchronia – i.e. alternate history narrative – was only eighteen years away: in 1836, Louis Geoffroy published *Napoléon et la conquête du monde*, a Bonapartist fiction in which Napoleon was victorious against the English and conquered the entire Europe and, later, the world (Alkon 115). In 1830, Stendhal would employ a similar artifice in *Le Rouge et le Noir*: «in this novel subtitled “Chronicle of 1830” we have no mention of the most notable event of the year: the July Revolution. Indeed, Mme de Rênal in the last pages of the novel proposes to seek clemency for Julien by pleading with King Charles X, who had been dethroned for almost a year» (Brooks 66). By so doing, Francesco Manzini argues, «the novel represents (and yet deliberately chooses not to represent) the uncontrollable energy that produces the Revolution of 1830» (83).

In *Frankenstein*, inasmuch as in *Le Rouge et le Noir*, the erasure of the Revolution – undeclared, and merely alluded to by means of its «failure of presence» – produces a subtly eerie feeling in the sense Mark Fisher has given to this term: the novel's landscape is haunted by something that should be there but is not, and which does not cease to cast its troubling shadow. Plainpalais, from this viewpoint, stands as a visible emblem of the contradictions animating the Revolution, between «the temporary bloodshed and injustice with which it was polluted» and the «enduring benefits» it produced «to mankind, which all the chicanery of statesmen, nor even the great conspiracy of kings, can entirely render vain» (Shelley and Shelley, *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* 102). The obelisk of Rousseau perfectly embodies this duplicity: in our world, erected by the successors of those who exiled him, it stands in the place where professed disciples of Rousseau betrayed – or perhaps brought to their extreme consequences – his teaching; in the world of *Frankenstein*, its eerie absence obliquely enlightens the deeds of a Creature that could have been a philosopher, and ended up being a murderer. Thirst for liberty, turning into a bloodshed: the Revolution too had its δαίμων κακός.

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<sup>15</sup> We may add that the subsequent trial against Justine Moritz is led by Swiss *magistrates*, and Alphonse Frankenstein asserts that he will prevent all partiality, testifying to his enduring influence in the city.

<sup>16</sup> This is incidentally one of the dates from which Robinson surmises that the year must actually be 1795: see the footnote *ad loc.* in his edition of the *Frankenstein* manuscript.

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