Elizabeth Lavenza in *Frankenstein* (II): “The image of her mind” (1818)

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In Thomas Dutoit’s pithy and accurate phrase, *Frankenstein* is a “text about faces” (852), a novel whose plot arguably revolves around Victor’s impossibility to see through the face of his creature. The correspondence between face and feelings, or between surface and the sensory illusion of depth, that is posited by the 1818 text when Victor says of Elizabeth that “her person was the image of her mind” (20[1]), is taken for granted thematically and never articulated in the revised version, as we saw in part I. This identification of outer appearance with the interiority of thought and feeling is founded on the pseudo-scientific presumptions of physiognomical correspondence which, according to Scott J. Juengel (354), “functions as *the* governing epistemological model operating in Shelley’s *Frankenstein*”. This is the model that Victor Frankenstein is shown depending upon repeatedly in the course of his encounters with the monster. Unsurprisingly, since physiognomy mattered greatly to Victor’s mentor, Albertus Magnus, who was himself influenced by Aristotle in this respect and others[2], Shelley’s protagonist demonstrates again and again his tendency to follow in his countryman Lavater’s footsteps, firstly with Elizabeth, secondly with M. Krempe – whose “repulsive countenance […] did not prepossess [him] in favour of his doctrine” (28) – and thirdly

[1] All references are to the 1818 edition.

[2] For an account of physiognomy and of its importance in the history of the novel, see Graeme Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel: Faces and Fortunes* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982), 3-34.

and most strikingly with the monster. According to this epistemological model, if Elizabeth's loveliness corresponds to her moral worth, then it follows that the monster's hideous appearance would be the sign of a vicious mind. Yet, as any reader of *Frankenstein* knows, the correspondence or non-correspondence between the monster's physical appearance and his moral attributes invites considerable scepticism and encourages us to regard the epistemological model at work here with a critical distance that is both doubtful of Victor's assumptions and liable to problematize the act of reading, whether it be of texts or of the faces represented within them, that the model implies.

In this second part, I will argue that this model which determines the flawed character of Victor's perception is linked to a certain conception of femininity prevalent at Shelley's time; what I will suggest is that *Frankenstein* engages with the demand for transparency upon which this faulty conception relies and problematizes it yet stops short of wholly rejecting it.

***Frankenstein* and physiognomical interpretation**

Although an interest in physiognomy can be traced in the 18th century English novel, its success in Shelley's time is largely due to the popularity of the theories of Johann Caspar Lavater (1775-78), "practically a household name in Britain from the moment in 1789 when the first English translation of his *Essays on Physiognomy* appeared" (Tytler 293) up to the early 1810s. When the future Mary Shelley, born in 1797, was nineteen days old, her father asked his friend William Nicholson, a chemist and disciple of Lavater, to perform a physiognomic reading on his daughter. In the report preserved among William Godwin's papers, Nicholson wrote that he saw "considerable memory and intelligence […] quick sensibility," concluding: "her manner may be petulant in resistance, but cannot be sullen" (Sunstein 22). According to John Graham, the tendency to consider physiognomy as a science waned after the 1780s, but although Godwin himself was no enthusiastic follower of the face-reading Swiss pastor, Lavater had his devotees among Godwin's circle, among whom Thomas Holcroft, and Shelley's father also claimed as late as 1831, the year that Frankenstein was revised, that "nothing can be more certain than that there is a science of physiognomy" (cited in Graham 568). Godwin's interest finds its way into the descriptions of his own fictional characters, for instance in the portrait he draws of Marguerite in *St Leon* which will be briefly discussed below. As for Mary Wollstonecraft, she translated and abridged

Lavater's *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe* in 1788 "with the liveliest interest" (cited in Graham 567) and met the author when he visited London in 1792. Wollstonecraft's position wavered, however; she expressed doubts about the soundness of Lavater's principles and methods, quipping in *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796) that Lavater must have found "lines in [Count Bernstorff's] face to prove him a statesman of the first order; because he has a knack at seeing a great character in the countenances of men in exalted stations, who have noticed him, or his works" (179). Whether or not Godwin, Wollstonecraft, Edgeworth, Lewis and others completely endorsed the principles on which Lavater based his analyses, "[e]ach of these writers used interpretations of facial details in presenting their fictional characters, indicating their absorption of a point of view sympathetic with that of Lavater" (Graham 567-68). It is thus not unreasonable to assume that Mary Shelley inherited an ambivalent vision of physiognomy from her parents. Furthermore, the success of Lavater's physiognomic treatise coincided with and contributed to the development of the novel of sensibility in the late 18th century, where meaning is conveyed by the body rather than by language, facial expressions being given pride of place[3]. The first decades of the 19th century pursued this exploration of the correspondence between the sensible and the spiritual, often formulated in terms of the relationship between the "inside" and the "outside" of the human body, with the publication of novels such as *Sense and Sensibility* by Austen and *Frankenstein*, in which Shelley echoes her parents' conflicting stance towards physiognomy and explores the dangers as well as the appeal of this approach.

Time and again, the dangers of judging a situation on the "face" of it are underlined in *Frankenstein*. Justine is sentenced to death because of her behaviour and of false evidence while Victor finds himself wrongly accused of Clerval's murder because of appearances: "they observed that it *appeared* that I had brought the body from another place, and it was likely, that as I did not *appear* to know the shore, I might have put into the harbour […]" (126, emphasis added). Situations prove misleading, and so may faces: Victor reconsiders his physiognomic interpretation of M. Krempe, overcoming his initial distrust and separating Krempe's "repulsive" appearance from his character. In Krempe's case, Victor distinguishes between inside and outside: "I found even in M. Krempe a great deal of sound sense and real information, combined, it is true, with a

[3] See Benedict 326-27.

repulsive physiognomy and manners, but not on that account the less valuable" (30). Victor here applies caution, although belatedly, as recommended by Lavater who advocated critical distance. No such distance benefits his creature though. As Scott J. Juengel observes, quoting Lavater, "Victor's interpretations of the creature's countenance are invariably consistent with the most fundamental of physiognomical tenets, that 'beauty and deformity of the countenance is in a just and determinate proportion to the moral beauty and deformity of the man'" (360). Whereas Victor's first impression of Krempe was belied by a better acquaintance with him, his first impression of the creature, which fills him with "breathless horror and disgust", serves as an unalterable basis for all ulterior readings of his behaviour. When Victor sees "one hand […] stretched out," he interprets this gesture as made "seemingly to detain [him]" (36), so as threatening since he runs away – the adverb "seemingly" making explicit the fact that Victor interprets the monster's appearance. Nowhere in the novel will he revise this judgment or envisage that he may have misread this gesture or his creature's face. As we know, the monster's account of himself differs, and so may the reader's, who can interpret this outstretched hand for instance as an infant's reaching out to the "father" that Victor, after all, purported to be. Victor reacts like everyone else on seeing the monster, that is, according to the latter, on a prejudice (or judgment formed *a priori*):

> they are prejudiced against me. I have good dispositions; my life has been hitherto harmless, and, in some degree, beneficial; but a fatal prejudice clouds their eyes, and where they ought to see a feeling and kind friend, they behold only a detestable monster. (93)

Plainly, according to the monster, his "inside", or moral sensibility, does not match his "outside", or physical appearance. So why is Victor able eventually to see through Krempe's "repulsive" face but not to read correctly the creature he has fashioned? In the next part of this essay, I would like to take up an analogy frequently made by critics that the creature is but a "woman in disguise" (Gilbert and Gubar 237) and suggest that behind the monster, Shelley examines a certain representation of femininity in her society and in fiction.

Physiognomy, women and Elizabeth Lavenza

The ideology of physiognomic correspondence finds its way into the fictional representations of the 18th and 19th centuries with various aims and effects, concerning both male and female characters. Smollett's Roderick Random possesses flaming red

hair which matches all too well his fiery personality, for instance. In *Frankenstein*, Victor's thoughts and emotions can be visible on his face, as when "Elizabeth read [his] anguish in [his] countenance" (63). But the construction in the course of the 18th century of the morally transparent body as an ethical constraint on women rendered this a particularly crucial issue for them and affected the descriptions of female characters. This process, started well before the publication of Lavater's theories, was already explored for instance in Burney's *Evelina* (1778), but during the lifetime of Mary Wollstonecraft and in that of her daughter[4], the success of physiognomy must have buttressed what rested hitherto on an ideological and religious basis. Sentences like this one, from James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1766)

> This breach of her most sacred law [chastity], the justice of Nature has generally branded with a look and manner particularly characteristic and significant; as, on the other side, she has always (I think, always) marked the genuine feelings of modesty with a look and manner no less correspondent and impressive (I 50),

or this: "Having no bad passions to conceal, your thoughts and manners will be transparent" (II 145), from the same source, must have taken on an additional meaning; the advice and guidelines given in the many conduct books of the period, whose weight on female writers is analysed in particular by Mary Poovey (3-47), received a scientific veneer which arguably made their message even more difficult to resist. The presentation of female characters, particularly in female-authored novels, bears witness to this difficulty.

Such is the case with the description of Elizabeth Lavenza in 1818, or rather with the two descriptions provided in part I, which do not rest on quite the same epistemological premises. The second one works in the traditional manner of Lavater's physiognomy (and of conduct books), from the outside to the inside, from the physical trait to the intellectual one which it signifies: "An open and capacious forehead gave indications of a good understanding, joined to great frankness of disposition. Her eyes were hazel, and expressive of mildness" (51). Limited to a surface reading, this passage, which is reminiscent of what we saw regarding 1831 Elizabeth in part I, focuses on "indications" and "expression" that are signs but no assurance of a "good understanding," "frankness" and "mildness". Here Victor limits his description to the surface, never telling us (or rather Walton) what Elizabeth's personality is really like. Since this is a retrospective narrative, and since, besides, Victor has been acquainted

[4] As William St Clair rather bluntly but aptly puts it, "women were a problem in Britain throughout the revolutionary and romantic period" (506).

with Elizabeth since childhood, he is supposed to be well aware of Elizabeth's character: he should not have to read on the surface what he already knows, all the more so as this jars with the sense of depth conveyed by the first description of Elizabeth in 1818 (excerpt A in Part I). Short as it is, this first portrait stands out when compared to the heroines of previous novels, especially male-authored, in the sense that Shelley has Victor present his cousin *from the inside out*. Victor begins by portraying Elizabeth's moral and intellectual worth ("docile," "good-tempered," "playful," with "strong and deep feelings," etc.) before turning to her appearance with the sentence "[h]er person was the image of her mind". Elizabeth's "person" confirms what he knows of her "mind," it does not signify it, or not only. Instead of appraising her personality based on her appearance, he finds confirmation in her looks of what he knows of her character; to put it differently, his knowledge of Elizabeth's feelings and understanding comes before his account of her face, in the way he presents it, working from the depths to the surface, if I may use this metaphor. This reverses the order of presentation found in many novels, where "appearance" precedes "essence," even in the case of characters supposedly known to the narrator. The first introduction of Fielding's Sophia Western by the omniscient narrator of *Tom Jones* begins with "the outside of Sophia," shifting to the inside a few paragraphs later with a phrase whose wording almost literally reverses Shelley's: "[h]er mind was every way equal to her person" (136). Closer chronologically to *Frankenstein*'s Elizabeth, another omniscient narrator, that of Scott's *Waverley* (1814), concludes Flora McIvor's physical description with the following sentence: "[h]er sentiments corresponded with the expression of her countenance" (107), before moving to the depiction of said sentiments. Or again, in *St Leon* (1799), which Shelley had re-read in 1814 and again in 1815, Godwin's first-person narrator describes his future wife thus[5]:

> Marguerite Louise Isabeau de Damville was, at the period of our first meeting, in the nineteenth year of her age. Her complexion was of the most perfect transparency, her eyes black and sparkling, and her eyebrows dark and long. Such were the perfect smoothness and clearness of her skin, that at nineteen she appeared five years younger than she was, and she long retained this extreme

[5] For a thorough analysis of the role played by physiognomy in Godwin's fiction, see Scott J. Juengel, "Godwin, Lavater, and the Pleasures of Surface", *Studies in Romanticism* 35, n° 1 (Spring, 1996), 73-97. Of course my choice of male authors and of novels here may seem limited and biased. Nevertheless they are fairly representative of works read and sometimes re-read by Shelley shortly before or during the conception and writing of *Frankenstein* (*St Leon* and *Waverley*, two novels which greatly influenced her) or no doubt read by her during her childhood or early teenage years; Godwin had called *Tom Jones* "one of the most admirable performances in the world" in "Of English Style" (*The Enquirer*, 1797 [462]). According to the Shelleys' reading list, Mary Shelley had read (most probably reread) *Amelia* in 1817. Incidentally, Sophia Western may very well be an inspiration for Shelley's Eastern Safie, both characters being dark-haired, dark-eyed orphans who escape their tyrannical fathers' commands to join the all-worthy man they love.

> juvenility of form. Her step was airy and light as that of a young fawn, yet at the same time firm, and indicative of strength of body and vigour of mind. Her voice, like the whole of her external appearance, was expressive of undesigning, I had almost said childish, simplicity. Yet, with all this playfulness of appearance, her understanding was bold and correct. Her mind was well furnished with every thing that could add to her accomplishments as a wife or a mother. […] (33-34)
> The purity of her mind seemed to give a celestial brilliancy and softness to the beauties of her person. (35)

The "transparency" of the "celestial" Marguerite's complexion functions as the visible sign of her purity; having no "bad passions to conceal," her "thoughts and manners" are transparent, to paraphrase Fordyce.

I would like to suggest that in this respect, Shelley has Victor describe Elizabeth, in this first passage at least, in a manner which corresponds better with the logic found in certain contemporary female authors when presenting similarly transparent characters, although her reading list does not include them. Here is Adeline in Ann Radcliffe's *Romance of the Forest* (1791):

> The observations and general behaviour of Adeline already bespoke a good understanding and an amiable heart, but she had yet more – she had genius. She was now in her nineteenth year; her figure of the middling size, and turned to the most exquisite proportion; her hair was dark auburn, her eyes blue, and whether they sparkled with intelligence, or melted with tenderness, they were equally attractive: her form had the airy lightness of a nymph, and, when she smiled, her countenance might have been drawn for the younger sister of Hebe: the captivations of her beauty were heightened by the grace and simplicity of her manners, and confirmed by the intrinsic value of a heart
> "That might be shrin'd in crystal,
> And have all its movements scann'd." (29).

The narrative voice moves from an estimate of Adeline's character, based on her behaviour to Madame de La Motte in the previous paragraph, to direct characterization of her mind ("she had genius") to a description of her physical appearance, before returning to the "intrinsic value" of a heart which "confirm[s]" Adeline's beauty: the outside confirms the inside and vice-versa. The unidentified quotation resorts to the image of the crystal and its transparency to highlight the heroine's purity and the perfect correspondence of her mind and body.

Mind and body correspond but are completely separated in the case of Jane Austen's ironically transparent Marianne Dashwood[6]. Her disposition is described at the end of the first chapter of *Sense and Sensibility* (1811): "She was sensible and

[6] Austen was very probably aware (and wary) of Lavater's theories, according to Graeme Tytler (307), which arguably plays a role in her presentation of Marianne.

clever; […] generous, amiable, interesting" (6), some thirty pages before her physical appearance in Chapter X:

> Her form, though not so correct as her sister's, in having the advantage of height, was more striking; and her face was so lovely, that when in the common cant of praise, she was called a beautiful girl, truth was less violently outraged than usually happens. Her skin was very brown, but, from its transparency, her complexion was uncommonly brilliant; her features were all good; her smile was sweet and attractive; and in her eyes, which were very dark, there was a life, a spirit, an eagerness, which could hardly be seen without delight. (35-36)

This portrait seems included as an afterthought, merely to explain the impression made by Marianne on Willoughby while the distance between the description of inside and outside in effect breaks the link between them, even though the character is endowed with "transparent" skin. No ethereal creature belonging to a different species like 1831 Elizabeth, Austen's lively and dark-eyed heroine also shares 1818 Elizabeth's "strong and deep" feelings (20) and sharply problematizes the cost of transparency, since the correspondence between her feelings and her body – she makes a point of showing what she feels – leads her to the brink of death. In fact, from Richardson's Clarissa to the early 19th century, transparency has become a trope used by novelists such as Burney, Austen or Shelley to describe a certain type of female characters who have an unfortunate tendency to die young; Elizabeth Lavenza comes after a long series of heroines, often, like Godwin's Marguerite, similarly ill-fated. Even a survivor like Sophia Western in a comic novel is indirectly but explicitly linked with death since Fielding's narrator resorts to a few lines taken from an elegy, Donne's "Elegy on Mistress Elizabeth Drury," to describe Sophia's metaphorical transparency: "Her pure and eloquent blood/ Spoke in her cheeks, and so distinctly wrought/ That one might almost say her body thought" (135).

Furthermore, despite her transparency, Marianne Dashwood long remains a mystery to her sister and to the reader since it is impossible to know whether or not she is engaged to Willoughby until the novel is more than half way through. Austen articulates a dialectics between the opacity and the transparency of her female protagonist which greatly resembles what Shelley does with her monster in *Frankenstein*[7]. It might seem paradoxical to speak of transparency with regard to the

[7] I am not suggesting that Shelley was in any way directly influenced by Austen since to my knowledge there exists no trace of her reading *Sense and Sensibility* or *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), whose first title was "First Impressions" and which interrogates the role played by subjectivity in knowledge of the other. Rather, I wish to point out that the intellectual and cultural climate of the 1810s has led the two main female novelists of the decade to explore and to some extent denounce the "transparency myth".

creature, whose face, as Thomas Dutoit points out, is "opaque" (853). But this opacity is an ironical one since "[h]is yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath" (35). His literally transparent skin is the first trait mentioned in Victor's famous description of his creature, and it echoes Elizabeth's metaphorical one a few pages before (we saw in part I how closely the monster and Elizabeth are connected, among other things thanks to the shift between the literal and the metaphorical registers). With his visible arteries, the monster's complexion grotesquely evokes a desirable feature in a woman's appearance which Lovelace for instance dwells on in his description of Clarissa: "this lady is all glowing, all charming flesh and blood; yet so clear, that every meandring *vein* is to be seen in all the lovely parts of her which custom permits to be visible" (399, emphasis added). Precisely because of its transparency, the monster's hideous surface prevents potential interpreters from accessing his inside, from reading him properly; they all stop at the outside, with the obvious exception of the blind De Lacey. *Frankenstein* thus questions the very basis on which Victor's knowledge rests. Far from allowing one access to the inside, to the depths, the surface becomes an obstacle when reading it is posited as the only mode of access to truth, largely because the subjectivity of the interpreter, his or her prejudices, may not be taken into account – a pre-determined interpretation thus being understood as objective. Once again, the monster literalizes what remains metaphorical for the other characters, here especially Victor: when he looks into a "transparent pool", he views not the depths of the pool, not its bottom, but the reflection of himself on the "mirror"-like surface (78). The image of the mirror makes clear the risk of seeing one's self in the other, and it does so, in this seminal passage of the novel, at the very moment when self-awareness begins, when subjectivity is constituted, revealing that it is built into human beings' access to the world. Physiognomists obviously run the same risk. Analysing the physiognomical readings performed by the virtuous heroes of sentimental novels, Barbara Benedict draws the following conclusion: "[b]oth physiognomists and sentimental heroes see virtuously because they see naively: locked in a Lacanian mirror stage, they see themselves in the other" (320). The face-reader, from this perspective, can only see himself or herself in the other's countenance, consciously or not, just as the text-reader may be tempted to interpret a novel based on his or her mind-set; the mirror suggests that it is his own ugliness which Victor sees in the monster.

Is it his own virtue that he sees in Elizabeth then? The failure of Victor's reading of his creature does not necessarily entail that the legibility of the human body is an illusion or that a correspondence between outside and inside may never exist; nothing in the novel leads us to believe that his interpretation of Elizabeth's character is incorrect, or for that matter that Elizabeth is wrong when reading anguish in Victor's countenance in the excerpt quoted above. Because of the many links uniting the monster and Elizabeth, it does however question the stress on feminine transparency so prevalent at Shelley's time in literature and in society, which appears so often in conduct books and in the description of idealized female characters like Godwin's Marguerite because, as in the 1831 version of Elizabeth, it amounts to a denial of the human characteristics associated with a sense of depth, feelings, understanding etc. If the monster really is a female in disguise, then by implication there is nothing beneath the surface and no need for Victor to reconsider his first judgment, as he does with Krempe. The difference between the two brief descriptions of Elizabeth mentioned above may help us understand the extent of Shelley's critique. When Victor sees Elizabeth as a "playfellow," "a friend," a "companion," a "future wife" only in a distant future, his depiction of her mingles surface and depth (20). But when he returns home after six years at Ingolstadt, the "girl" has become a "woman," a very possible bride in a very near future (53). Victor's focus on the surface in his second reading of Elizabeth can be said to be motivated by his fear of female desire, obvious in the dream in which Elizabeth's warm body becomes his mother's corpse or when he tears the female monster's body to pieces; this has been the subject of many feminist readings of the novel. Beyond Victor, it is her society's reduction of women to surfaces that Shelley questions by showing the dramatic consequences that may result from it. The superficiality of a woman's upbringing was denounced in particular by Mary Wollstonecraft, who explained how the stress on a woman's appearance led that woman to become mere surface: "Taught from their infancy, that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body" (*Vindication* 58)[8]. Victor's impossibility of going beyond his interpretation of the monster's surface, his refusal to allow that there might be a beautiful inside behind the horrible outside makes blatantly visible, on a literal level, what women were confronted with in Shelley's time and the dangers and

[8] For an analysis of the "tremendous extent to which […] social, moral and biological taxonomies are shaped by aesthetic principles" in *Frankenstein*, see Heymans (119).

potential destructiveness of such an approach to the feminine for men and women alike. Working from another starting-point, Joyce Zonana reaches a similar conclusion:

> Because he is regarded as pure flesh, the monster's fate is comparable to that of women in patriarchal society: no matter how hard he tries, his status as 'creature' blinds his creator (and all other humans who can see) to his status as 'rational being'" (176)[9].

However pertinent and convincing this analysis may be, it does not account for the ambiguous manner in which the access to knowledge through physiognomy is represented; *Frankenstein* does not contain simply a criticism of the cult of transparency and of its face-reading preachers, if only because, as mentioned above, Victor seems to be right in his assessment of Elizabeth's character (at least, nothing contradicts it within the diegesis). In the last part of this essay, I would like to examine the appeal that such an approach may have for a Romantic writer like Shelley.

Paradise Lost

Frankenstein exposes the attempt at equating "inside" and "outside," at seeking for a perfect correspondence between what one shows and what one thinks or feels as dangerous and destructive ideology. Yet physiognomy also represents an ideal in several respects, and it seems to me that its appeal lingers on in the novel. First, it pretends to offer a world of meaning and community, a hermeneutic system where with the requisite skill and a little caution, the interpreter supposedly possesses a key to understand others and to connect with them, since he or she also has human features which in turn may be read. As Barbara Benedict explains, "[t]he reciprocity of […] physiognomist and face […] suggests a world of ideal unity and legibility" (323). This unity is also that of the individual human being, who thus finds a way out of the dichotomy which opposes matter and spirit; the utopia of "a morally transparent anatomy" (Juengel 357) so prevalent in the 18th century[10] rests on a doctrine postulating the unity of the human being, a fundamental coherence, a connectedness between body and soul. Beyond, it postulates coherence between words and reality,

[9] In this respect, these conclusions are close to those reached by Peter Brooks in his highly influential essay "What is a Monster?". Adopting a psycho-analytical approach and insisting on completely different elements in the novel, notably the creation of the monster as a mother substitute, he wonders if "the Monster is not in fact a woman who is seeking to escape from the feminine condition into recognition by the fraternity" and speculates on "Mary Shelley's attempts to escape the generic and cultural codes that make heroines into objects to be looked at" (218).

[10] Barbara Stafford calls physiognomy "the 'universal science' of the Enlightenment" (quoted by Juengel 354). See Barbara Maria Stafford, *Body Criticism: Imagining the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine,* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991.

as when Victor insists – in vain, which should alert us to the flawed nature of his system – on the "connected" aspect of his story to the magistrate (142). It thus professes to offer a world of truth where deceit would be impossible; looking at a person, male or female, would suffice to know exactly who he or she is, in terms of identity and of character, as is the case with Burney's Evelina, the living image of her mother, or with Richard of York in *Perkin Warbeck*, who asks a gypsy to "read" him": "read my palm; read rather my features, and learn indeed who I am", i.e. the son of Edward IV and another doomed transparent character in Shelley's fiction (187)[11]. Transparency is a fundamentally ethical stance according to which appearance should correspond to essence, a stance which Austen's erring but sometimes admirable Marianne chooses in defiance of the hypocritical world she lives in. Austen certainly denounces Marianne's standpoint and the character serves as a counterexample, but the profound ambiguities of *Sense and Sensibility* and its notoriously unsatisfactory ending make this a difficult position to maintain unequivocally. It would be just as difficult in my view to assert that Shelley simply rejects the dream of transparency and the ideal of unity it relies on, a Romantic ideal where opposites can be reconciled, like the world Walton dreams of, where "the seat of frost and desolation" that is the pole can be converted into "the region of beauty and delight" (7), or a world where the boundaries between life and death would be "ideal," i.e. imaginary, as in Victor's visions (33). Of course, such an ideal is destructive: several members of Walton's crew die and the Frankenstein family is nearly annihilated. But its ultimate attraction lies in its claim to unite human beings to the divine. That Lavater should have been a pastor is no coincidence; he was looking for God in human faces and devised a system relying on "a faith in the sign, the unity of signifier and signified[12], God and man, appearance and reality" (Benedict 312). In other words, he was looking for a lost paradise, the place where, as Jean Starobinski explains in his work on Rousseau, "c'était la transparence réciproque des consciences, la communication totale et confiante" (19). For many writers of the late 18th and early 19th century, however aware they may have been that they did not live in such a world, that quest found its embodiment in the transparent female character. The vision of woman constructed in the course of the 18th century, that of a child-like being who can retain that child-like transparency, a dream of

[11] On the analogy between palmistry and physiognomical see Benedict 316.

[12] For two different and stimulating approaches to the linguistic aspect of transparency (or lack thereof), see Brooks 1978 and Cross.

immediacy that 1831 Elizabeth, in her celestial simplicity, embodies more than her predecessor, testifies to the lingering power of that myth. That this type of character usually met with an untimely death shows how conscious those writers were of the lethal character of the transparency myth, but that did not prevent them from being attracted to Lavater's theories, as we saw above, perhaps precisely for no other reason than to debunk them.

It seems to me that the 1831 text provides a more damning condemnation of this myth and of the epistemological process it relies on because its Elizabeth, limited to a mere mirror-like surface, reflects whatever Victor wishes to see. The sense of depth in the portrait of 1818 Elizabeth, however fleeting, hints at a different approach and begs the question that sophisticated readers may scoff at: if Elizabeth's person *is* "the image of her mind," could the same be said for the creature's? Is Victor's reading of the creature really erroneous? After all, the monster is the ultimate unreliable narrator. We literally only have his word for it that he helped the De Laceys (how could Safie and Felix's letters prove that?) or saved a young girl[13]. We are led to believe him because of his eloquence, but what prevents us from seeing him, for instance, as a forebear of Frederick Clegg in Fowles' *The Collector* (1963), making up excuses for himself, pleading the purity of his intentions and blaming society for his isolation while kidnapping and letting a young woman die? If we confront his words with his actions, what emerges is that he murdered a young boy and framed an innocent woman, thereby condemning her to death. He relates that his first action was to steal food from a poor old man (72-73), while his last act before venturing on the Arctic sea was to "carr[y] off their store of winter food" from villagers and steal their dogs (148). What if the features selected by Victor for his creature were really "beautiful" (35), but the monster's evil mind shone through them? As readers, we are confronted with two possible types of interpretation. In the first one, we are to take everything at "face value", transparently: the monster's person is ugly because his mind is ugly. In the second one, opacity reigns and nothing can be taken for what it seems. Because they rely on completely opposed epistemological modes, the two interpretations should be mutually exclusive and yet they co-exist in the novel. This partly accounts for the

[13] Lipking states the case for or against the monster and Victor very wittily and convincingly (420-421), concluding with Mary Shelley's deliberate ambiguity, "the courage of her lack of conviction" (433).

hundreds of readings which *Frankenstein* has received, rather fittingly for a novel which interrogates the dream of an unequivocal reading.

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