



“Are you being serious, Frankenstein?” Transtextuality and Postmodern Appropriation in Peter Ackroyd’s *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein*

Marta Miquel-Baldellou¹

Abstract. This article is grounded on the premise that the story behind Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) has acquired the status of a myth, which has been subjected to all sorts of adaptations that have ensured its current popularity. Looking into *Frankenstein* as a romantic text with certain traits that forestall postmodern theories, this study approaches Peter Ackroyd’s novel *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* (2008) as a postmodern adaptation of Mary Shelley’s classic through Gérard Genette’s inclusive critical term of transtextuality. With the aim to identify Ackroyd’s contribution to the myth of Frankenstein, this article analyses instances of intertextuality, insofar as Ackroyd’s text reproduces quotations from some of Mary Shelley’s autobiographical writings as well as from her seminal novel *Frankenstein*. Through displays of hypertextuality, Ackroyd’s postmodern novel also transforms Shelley’s original story resorting to metafiction, introducing changes in the structure and the focalisation of the narrative, and making use of parodic elements. Finally, Ackroyd’s postmodern novel also presents examples of metatextuality, inasmuch as it incorporates twists in the plot as a result of applying different critical readings of Mary Shelley’s seminal text.

Key words: postmodernism, adaptation, intertextuality, hypertextuality, metatextuality.

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1. Introduction

Although in Jungian psychology and in literary myth criticism, from T.S. Eliot to Northrop Frye, myths are almost exclusively defined as products of pre-literate cultures, Chris Baldick considers the story underlying Mary Shelley’s classic novel

¹ Research group Dedal-Lit, English Department, University of Lleida (Spain)
E-mail: mmiquel@dal.udl.cat

Frankenstein (1818) a modern as well as a Romantic myth (1992: 1). Myths are open to all sorts of adaptation and transformation, even if they may preserve some of their essence through the story they transmit, thus prolonging their existence through retelling their basic underlying story and finding new contexts of application, given their adaptability and capacity for change through time. As Baldick further argues, the story of a myth, corresponding to Aristotle's concept of 'mythos' or basic action, can be interpreted through either a timeless archetypal approach, which may read *Frankenstein* as an enduring parable of the human condition, or through a historical approach that would emphasise the contextual conditions in which the story originated, such as the uncanny danger of scientific inventions at the time of its inception, thus differing from contemporary interpretations of Mary Shelley's novel. In his seminal structural study about the myth, Claude Lévi-Strauss contends that the prevalence of a myth is not established by authorising only its earliest version, but by considering all its varieties, and in this context, with regard to Mary Shelley's novel, Chris Baldick asserts that it is all the "series of adaptations, allusions, accretions, analogues, parodies, and plain misreadings" (1992: 4) following its original story that have ultimately constituted its myth and have ensured its continuing popularity.

The primal story behind *Frankenstein* has been rewritten and reproduced to the extent that, as Paul O'Flinn argues, Mary Shelley's novel exemplifies many ways in which a text can be continuously altered and readjusted. The myth of *Frankenstein* has been rearranged through critical apparatuses that have provided different readings of the text, it has been transformed by the shifts produced on adapting the text to other media such as the cinema, and it has also been modified as a result of the passage of time, which has endowed the story with new meanings and has given precedence to particular interpretations of its basic plot relevant to contemporary tastes (2005: 106). As a case in point, Peter Ackroyd's postmodern novel *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* (2008) can be considered one of the most recent literary instances of rearrangement of Mary Shelley's original story. Following Gérard Genette's inclusive term of transtextuality, defined as all that sets a text in relationship with other texts, Ackroyd's novel exemplifies different typologies of transtextuality, such as intertextuality, hypertextuality, and metatextuality. In an evident display of transtextuality, Ackroyd's text follows the plot of the seminal novel of *Frankenstein* quite closely, while it also resorts to tenets pertaining to postmodern criticism that contribute to transforming Mary Shelley's original text. Most of these tenets were somehow already latent in Mary Shelley's novel through its debt to Romantic principles, but they become more explicitly manifest in Ackroyd's text, especially through the use of narrative techniques widely spread in postmodern narratives, such as parody and irony, metafiction and self-awareness, and the belief that fiction, despite its fragmented and non-linear quality, can be more faithful to truth than reality itself. This article thus aims to analyse Peter Ackroyd's novel *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* as a text that adapts and transforms Mary Shelley's classic from a postmodern perspective.

2. Frankenstein: From a Romantic to a Postmodern Myth

Drawing on Romantic tenets, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* warns about the threat of rationalism and grand discourses, it unveils the uncanny quality of the Creature as a result of an increasingly mechanised society, and it adapts as well as updates the classical Promethean myth, focusing on a Romantic hero that dares defy the limits of knowledge, while it also turns into a cautionary tale about the perils of boundless scientific breakthroughs. Some of these Romantic tenets that Mary Shelley's novel exemplifies also bear some resemblance with features pertaining to postmodern theories, which remain latent in the novel, paving the ground for interpretations of the text as a forerunner of postmodern writings, and giving way to postmodern adaptations of the original text, as Ackroyd's novel *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* demonstrates. In comparison with Mary Shelley's classic, Ackroyd's text turns into a postmodern adaptation of *Frankenstein*, including important changes with respect to the original text, such as the blending of fictional episodes with historical events that shed light over the inception of the original novel, the virtual quality of the Creature, as it is ultimately a product of Victor Frankenstein's mind, and the portrayal of Victor as a Romantic artist who grows insane as a result of his creative delusions.

As a main feature characterising Ackroyd's novel as an eminently postmodern text, there is the customary transgression between the fictional and the factual, owing to what Fredric Jameson calls the crisis of representation (Hutcheon 2002: 71) in our culture, resulting from the impossibility of separating facts from acts of interpretation. Ackroyd's novel thus places significant emphasis on self-reflexivity, drawing attention to the events that are presented in the narrative, but also to the acts of narration and interpretation regarding the original novel it addresses explicitly. It can be argued that this component of postmodern theories that emphasises the importance of textuality and the unreliability of facts was already present in Mary Shelley's original novel, inasmuch as it is built upon other texts through direct allusions to literary works by Goethe and Milton, and the elaboration of the classical myth of Prometheus, while it also tackles the blending of fact and fiction, echoing philosophical and scientific ideas, as well as historical events taking place at the time.

Given the cultural context of Romanticism, as William Walling claims, *Frankenstein* involved a counterstatement to the expansive rationalism that characterised the Enlightenment (1990: 105). Hence, by means of the use of different narrators telling the story through diverse texts, such as letters and journals, *Frankenstein* also places emphasis on subjectivity and rejects the apparent objectivity created with the use of omniscient narrators, while the text is constructed through fragmented forms that turn the narrative into a textual collage. In this respect, it can be argued that Mary Shelley's novel anticipates Jean-François Lyotard's thesis about scepticism towards grand narratives or main discourses prevailing at the time, such as imperialism, science, and the advent of industrialisation, insofar as Captain Walton leaves behind his exploring ambitions after hearing Victor's story, Frankenstein realises that his egoistical aspirations to defeat death end in disaster, while, symbolically, the Creature's rebellious reaction towards his master gives voice to the proletariat and calls into question the basis of the capitalist system, which alienates the Creature and turns it into a commodity.

Likewise, if *Frankenstein* is made up of different texts, Ackroyd's postmodern novel retraces the story in Mary Shelley's novel, although it incorporates important modifications in terms of characters, plot, and structure, while it also includes manifold references to the actual circumstances that gave rise to *Frankenstein*, blending the fiction in Mary Shelley's novel with the facts that originated its plot.

In comparison with Mary Shelley's text, given the transtextual and metafictional quality of *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein*, Ackroyd's novel literally suggests that the act of representing necessarily duplicates, inasmuch as his postmodern novel replicates Mary Shelley's classic, also echoing Victor Frankenstein's ambition to duplicate life. Ackroyd's text represents the postmodern concept of simulacrum, mostly owing to the undeniable contemporary influence of new technologies, virtual reality, and the media. In this sense, it can be argued that, in addition to being proclaimed as the first science fiction novel, *Frankenstein* also foretells some of the theories of major postmodern critics, such as those of Jean Baudrillard. In fact, in Mary Shelley's novel, once the Creature comes into being, it turns into a copy or reproduction of different original bodies to the extent that the Creature, to use Baudrillard's terms, can be perceived as a signifier with no signified behind, as the Creature is mostly judged by its appearance, which Baudrillard calls simulacrum, in the sense that, in *Frankenstein*, the lack of originals and the prevalence of copies create a sense of hyperreality, as simulacra are actually taken for reality. Nonetheless, in contrast with Shelley's text, in *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein*, the Creature is not made up of limbs from different bodies, but Victor's creation responds to having endowed Jack Keat's corpse with life, turning him into a literal copy of its original, by effect of an electrical mechanism that Victor Frankenstein has devised. Ackroyd's most outstanding contribution lies in the fact that the Creature literally turns into a product of Frankenstein's mind and is simply non-existing in the narrative, thus, in Ackroyd's text hyperreality is actually taken for reality.

Mary Shelley's classic novel also gives significant evidence of the fluid and unstable quality characterising identity formation, since the Creature is portrayed as innocent, but social prejudices contribute to turning Victor's creation into a monster, while Victor falls prey to his own ambitions, thus arising as a Romantic hero, but also as the subject morally guilty of all the Creature's crimes. Ackroyd's postmodern novel also resumes the debates about the ambivalent character of Victor Frankenstein as the hero or the villain of the story in relation to the Creature. According to postmodern precepts, the notion of subjectivity involves a process, and as Michel Foucault claims, the subject becomes a construct that is historically conditioned, in the sense that, according to Linda Hutcheon, the representation of the self is never taken as a reflection but as a construction, as the notion of representing the self implies constituting the self (2002: 39). As a postmodern adaptation of Mary Shelley's classic, Ackroyd's novel expands on psychoanalytical readings of the original novel and even goes as far as to ascertain that the Creature becomes Victor's double, as Victor embodies reason whereas the Creature personifies its creator's unconsciousness, since the disclosure that the Creature only exists in Victor's mind and is actually the result of his insane ponderings necessarily exculpates the Creature of any crime. Hence, through a postmodern twist of the plot, Ackroyd's novel thus confirms the doubleness of the self, as interpretations of Victor and the Creature as doubles of each other are taken

over and exploited to the extent that the non-existing Creature is portrayed as a materialisation of Victor's unconscious, while Victor is presented as the artistic embodiment of the Romantic temperament.

3. Displays of Transtextuality in Ackroyd's Novel

Ackroyd's contribution to the myth of Frankenstein can be examined through the analysis of different levels of transtextuality existing between his postmodern adaptation and Mary Shelley's seminal novel. According to Gérard Genette, the broad concept of transtextuality, which consists of any kind of textual connection between two texts, can be further explored through the notions of intertextuality – involving explicit references and allusions to other texts, hypertextuality – by means of which a hypertext transforms a previous hypotext, and metatextuality – through which a text comments critically upon another one. Taking into consideration these concepts within comparative studies, in terms of intertextuality, Ackroyd's postmodern novel incorporates quotes from Mary Shelley's autobiographical writings as well as literal excerpts from her novel *Frankenstein*. Ackroyd's novel also transforms Shelley's classic through displays of hypertextuality, by means introducing changes in the plot, the location, and the structure of the original novel; focalising the action on the character of Victor, and introducing a series of elements of parody. Likewise, Ackroyd's text also elaborates on Mary Shelley's novel through metatextuality, developing its narrative on the basis of contemporary critical readings of *Frankenstein*.

3.1. A case of Intertextuality: Explicit References to Mary Shelley's Text

By means of a series of instances of intertextuality, Ackroyd's novel includes quotations taken not only from *Frankenstein*, but also from autobiographical documents, such as the Introduction that Mary Shelley wrote to the 1831 edition, which, in Ackroyd's novel is transcribed and transformed slightly to describe Victor's nightmare shortly after succeeding in giving birth to the Creature. The following quotation taken from *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* gives evidence of the blending between fact and fiction in Ackroyd's novel, as this excerpt fictionalises Mary Shelley's autobiographical account of the origin of her novel *Frankenstein*, and also turns into an evident example of intertextuality, as it consists of an example of direct allusion, almost word by word, to Mary Shelley's well-known account of the nightmare that gave rise to her novel.

When I placed my head on the pillow, however, I did not sleep; nor could I be said to think of anything in particular. My mind was like a canvas on which a succession of images passed. Once, when I had been ill of a fever in Chamonix, the same sensation had possessed me; it was as if my imagination had become my guide, leading me forward in a direction over which I had no possible control. [...] And then, most tremendous of all, I saw myself kneeling by the bed of some gigantic shadowy form. This bed was my bed, and the shape was stretched out upon it. Yet I could not be sure of its nature. Then it began to show signs of life, and to stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion. (Ackroyd 2009: 105)

If, in Mary Shelley's novel, this autobiographical text describes how she came up with the idea to write her novel, as, in her nightmare, she envisioned a medical student horrified by his creation, in Ackroyd's postmodern adaptation of the original text, the same passage is inserted within the narrative and is used to portray how the character of Victor Frankenstein gains insight into the abominable result of his mad ambition to play God and defy death. If Mary Shelley resorted to a nightmare to write a novel and explained her real experience in the Introduction to her book, thus ultimately distinguishing her autobiographical explanation from the text of the narrative, Ackroyd makes use of the factual account written by Mary Shelley to devise a fictional passage of his novel, thus fictionalising Mary Shelley's autobiographical account and giving Victor Frankenstein's confession an imprint of truthfulness. Likewise, the fact that, in Ackroyd's novel, Victor Frankenstein reproduces the autobiographical writing of the author of *Frankenstein* explicitly also contributes to blurring the roles of Mary Shelley as an author and of Victor Frankenstein as a character. Hence, being a postmodern version of the original text of *Frankenstein*, it can be argued that Ackroyd's text complies with Roland Barthes' notion of the death of the author, as, in *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley turns into another character within the story, and the reader approaches Ackroyd's novel as an example of metafiction, as fictional characters coexist with actual writers and intellectuals.

In addition to quoting from Mary Shelley's introduction to the original novel in its 1831 edition, *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* also includes quotations taken from Mary Shelley's original novel that have become significantly emblematic after years of critical interpretations of the original text. As a case in point, upon gaining insight into its rejection by its creator, in Ackroyd's novel, the Creature challenges Victor with the following words:

"I will not be with you always. I will not be with you often. But when you are least ready, then I will be there. What if I were to appear on your wedding night?"

"How can there be such a thing, when I know that you are somewhere around me?"

"Precisely. I am no slave. I am your master. And remember this, sir. You are sure to be visited by me". (Ackroyd 2009: 257)

The text above turns into a significant example of Gérard Genette's notion of intertextuality, inasmuch as it elaborates on well-known extracts literally taken from Mary Shelley's classic, such as "you are my creator, but I am your master—obey!" (Shelley 2003: 172), and "remember, I shall be with you on your wedding-night" (Shelley 2003: 173). For any reader acquainted with Mary Shelley's novel, the fact that Ackroyd's adaptation includes quotations from *Frankenstein*, on the one hand, has the effect of indulging in their recognition, identifying traces of Mary Shelley's text as if Ackroyd's novel was a palimpsest containing traces of the original narrative. On the other hand, though, the fact of having a text within a text also causes an effect of estrangement on the reader, since, as a kind of pastiche, *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* places passages written by Mary Shelley at the same level as passages written by Ackroyd himself, ultimately creating the

virtual impression that Ackroyd's adaptation, in its evident knowledge of *Frankenstein* and the circumstances that gave rise to it, appears to be more real than its predecessor in spite of its all the same fictional quality.

3.2. From Hypertext to Hypertext: Transforming Mary Shelley's Novel

Displays of hypertextuality in Ackroyd's novel mostly amount to the transformation of Mary Shelley's original text in terms of setting, plot, characters, structure, final resolution, and the use of significant elements of parody. Above all, though, Ackroyd's postmodern novel exhibits a self-conscious knowledge of the original text, and of the cultural context of Romanticism in which *Frankenstein* came to light. The juxtaposition of new elements within the plot of the original narrative together with real characters and events that exerted a significant influence on Mary Shelley to write her novel turns Ackroyd's adaptation of the original text into a hypertext that elaborates on the hypotext of *Frankenstein* and comments on the context of its inception, involving readers acquainted with Mary Shelley's classic and encouraging them to feel emotionally involved through recognition and familiarity.

The change of setting from the University of Ingolstadt in Switzerland, where Victor experiments with the principle of life in Mary Shelley's novel, to the University of Oxford and then the city of London, where Victor learns about the intricacies of the afterlife in Ackroyd's novel, involves a significant alteration with respect to the original text, particularly as, even if Victor is still a scientist, he is portrayed as particularly influenced by his friendship with outstanding English poets within Romanticism. Victor becomes acquainted with the ideals within this artistic movement, which are presented as the main reason why Victor turns into an idealist and decides to rebel against the established principles of life and death. Ackroyd's choice to focus the action of the novel in an English setting contributes to contextualising the story from a historical and cultural perspective, addressing the ideals of Romanticism that began to take shape in England at the beginning of the nineteenth-century, but also underlines the author's postmodern twist to the novel, transforming it from an eminent forerunner of science fiction to a text that explicitly heralds the most important proponents of Romanticism and celebrates the excellence of the Romantic poets to the extent that Victor Frankenstein aspires to emulate them and become a member of this select literary group.

As a case in point, in Ackroyd's narrative, while studying in Oxford, Victor Frankenstein becomes closely acquainted with the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, who plays a similar role to Henry Clerval, Victor's close friend, in Mary Shelley's novel. Likewise, Victor attends a lecture that the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge gives around the relationship between imagination and the principle of existence, which exerts an important influence on unleashing Victor's ambitious goal to create life. Later on, Victor and his friend Percy Shelley go to the theatre in London to attend a play based upon Percy Shelley's own tragic experiences, and it is there that they befriend the poet Lord Byron, who is also among the audience. Through his friendship with Percy Shelley, Victor also meets the philosopher William Godwin and his daughter Mary, with whom Percy falls in love and marries eventually, after the tragic decease of his first wife Harriet. Likewise, by means of his acquaintance with Lord Byron, Victor meets Doctor Polidori, who,

being a scientist, becomes particularly interested in Victor's experiments, but he gradually casts a suspicious glance on Victor's peculiar behaviour and also plays a major role in unravelling the mystery surrounding the Creature.

Ackroyd's novel also turns into a hypertext of Mary Shelley's classic, insofar as it trails as well as it transforms important events within the plot of *Frankenstein*. In terms of the characterisation of the Creature, if in the original novel, the Creature is made up of limbs of different corpses, in Ackroyd's adaptation, the Creature comes back to life after endowing a great amount of electrical energy to the corpse of a single individual, who was portrayed as sensitive and delicate, who died as a result of an illness at a very young age, and who bore the name of Jack Keat. It becomes noticeable that, in Ackroyd's novel, the Creature is for the first time given a name, and once more, in the context of English Romanticism, not only is his name strongly reminiscent of that of the poet John Keats, but also his physical description and the circumstances of his death. Symbolically enough, Ackroyd identifies the Creature with an inherent representative of the literary circle of the Romantics, who comes back to life precisely as a result of the fact that Victor Frankenstein puts into practice the rebellious ideals of Romanticism. Likewise, if in Mary Shelley's novel, the Creature usually chooses his victims among Victor Frankenstein's circle in order to take revenge on his creator, in Ackroyd's text, the unexpected return of Jack Keat from death causes his sister's demise by accident, while the Creature slays Harriet Westbrook, Percy Shelley's wife at the time, and is also incidentally responsible for the death of Harriet's brother, Daniel, who is found guilty of the murder of his sister and is sentenced to death. In Ackroyd's novel, rather than slaying Victor's relatives, it appears that the Creature is more interested in causing the death of Percy's circle, and especially of his wives, as the Creature first slays Harriet and, ironically enough, is also about to murder Mary Godwin, Percy's fiancée, at the time. Hence, in Ackroyd's novel, the motif of the Creature's murders does not lie in vindictive aims, but rather, as will be shown later, in a reification of Victor Frankenstein's jealousy, and by extension, of his intimate relationship with his friend Percy Shelley.

Ackroyd's text also presents important modifications in terms of the original structure of Mary Shelley's hypotext, since if *Frankenstein* has been mostly considered an epistolary novella – made up of Captain Walton's letters to his sister, Victor Frankenstein's own narrative as explained to Captain Walton, and the Creature's own confession to its creator – *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* abandons this concentric tripartite structure and turns into Victor's personal diary, with only one homodiegetic narrator, and with the Creature's narrative embedded within Victor Frankenstein's journal. The focalisation of the narrative on the character of Victor Frankenstein in Ackroyd's novel underscores the figure of the visionary Romantic hero, emphasising the role of imagination, which gains precedence over that of science in this postmodern text, especially when, in Ackroyd's narrative, Victor befriends many Romantic poets and it is him, instead of the Creature, who finds himself perusing Goethe's seminal Romantic novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. In fact, as is revealed by the end of the novel, Victor's narrative is actually exposed to be his own medical case as a patient of the Hoxton Mental Asylum for Incurables, thus unveiling that Victor's story essentially entails the delusions of an insane mind. Hence, Victor's medical case calls into question the existence of the Creature in the story, to the extent that the symbiosis between

creator and its creation is further emphasised, and the action is shown to be entirely focalised on Victor as the main character of the narrative.

As further evidence of the hypertextuality between Mary Shelley's hypotext and Ackroyd's hypertext, there are many elements of parody in *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* that underline how Ackroyd's novel contains an important number of ironic and self-conscious references to the original text from which it departs. As Hutcheon claims, parody becomes a significant device in postmodern writing, as it contests issues related to originality and uniqueness, calling attention to the representational process, and underlining its self-reflexive and deconstructive potential (2002: 91). In Ackroyd's postmodern novel, as a student in Oxford, Victor Frankenstein becomes acquainted with his college servant, Florence, who, being English by birth, finds it extremely difficult to pronounce Victor's surname accurately, and ends up producing different versions of Victor's family name, such as "Frankenlime", "Frankentine", and "Frankenline", thus indulging in parodic episodes that suggest the postmodern belief in the lack of originals and echo the different representations of the hero in Mary Shelley's novel that have been produced since the publication of the original text. Likewise, this parodic element brings to mind Mel Brooks' comic film adaptation *Young Frankenstein* (1974), in which Frederick Frankenstein mispronounces his own surname on purpose so as to distinguish himself from his grandfather, Victor, whom he considered to be insane. Similarly, there are also parodic episodes in Ackroyd's novel that underline the self-reflexive quality of *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* as a postmodern adaptation of Mary Shelley's classic. In an episode of Ackroyd's novel, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley tells his guests William Godwin and Mary about his good friend Victor Frankenstein, when, by mere chance, Victor pays them a visit and Percy Shelley introduces him to Godwin and his daughter Mary. In the course of this highly symbolic conversation and in a significant display of parodic self-reflexivity, Percy Shelley admits that this is "the oddest and most singular coincidence" (Ackroyd 2009: 261-2), highlighting the fact that the writer Mary Shelley becomes acquainted with a character of her own creation. Likewise, in another highly parodic episode in Ackroyd's novel, one morning Mary Godwin tells the rest of the party about a nightmare she had in which she saw a phantom by her window, and it is soon afterwards that the dead body of one of the servants, Martha, is discovered, thus taking for granted that Mary's vision had been real and that she herself – as the writer of the original story – had almost turned into the next victim of the Creature. In a further display of postmodern parody, by the end of Ackroyd's novel, Victor Frankenstein unveils his story to Doctor Polidori, telling him about his experiments, the creation of the monster, and all the murders the monster has committed. Prior to his confession, though, Victor admits his case is so strange that he doubts whether Polidori would be able to believe him at all.

[Doctor Polidori] "Are you being serious, Frankenstein?"

[Victor Frankenstein] "I dare say you will be ready to laugh at me" (Ackroyd 2009: 400)

Taking into consideration the parodic surprising twist that awaits the reader at the end of the novel, which implies that Victor is an inmate in a lunatic asylum and

that he – instead of the Creature – is the only man to blame for all the recent murders, the quotation above turns into a parodic commentary upon the fantastic quality of Victor’s narrative in Mary Shelley’s original text – being the story of a scientist that manages to return the dead back to life – but it also turns into a self-reflexive observation on Ackroyd’s own transformation of this literary classic, as, in *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein*, as opposed to the original novel, the Creature is only believed to exist in Victor’s irrational mind.

3.3. In the Light of Critical Readings: Resorting to Metatextuality

According to postmodern precepts, the interpreter of literary texts, rather than the author, becomes the focal figure that endows the text with significance and unravels its underlying meanings. Ackroyd’s novel presents numerous examples of metatextuality, insofar as passages of *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* can be read in the light of different interpretations that have been put forward in relation to Mary Shelley’s original story.

3.3.1. Juxtaposing a Variety of Textualities

Ackroyd’s novel attends to the cultural and historical conditions that gave rise to *Frankenstein*, considering it as situated within the social practices and discourses that generated the culture of its particular time and setting. In its metatextual quality, *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* provides important information about the context in which Mary Shelley’s novel came into being, in the sense that excerpts that account for the actual situation that gave rise to *Frankenstein* are juxtaposed and approached in the same way as fictional episodes. Ackroyd’s novel comprises literary texts but also historical contexts, thus envisioning the original story of *Frankenstein* through its cultural background and also understanding its historical context through literature. In this respect, when in Ackroyd’s novel, Victor Frankenstein is invited to join his friend Percy Bysshe Shelley, his wife Mary Shelley, the poet Lord Byron, and Doctor Polidori in Byron’s Villa Diodati in Geneva, as a narrator Victor recreates the famous situation that Mary Shelley unveils in the introduction to her novel *Frankenstein* and that gave shape to her story:

We settled down comfortably enough after dinner, however, and Byron brought down from his room a collection of German tales translated into English. He told us that they were all of a wonderfully morbid and eerie nature, coming under the general title of *Fantasmagoriana*. By the light of the candles, placed on either side of his chair, he began reading one of them aloud. But then he threw the book aside. “This is all very well”, he said. “But it is not the thing. The genuine article. What I mean is this. We must tell our own stories on these dark nights. We must entertain ourselves – with truths, with inventions, what you wish. They will be a wonderful accompaniment to the storms”. (Ackroyd 2009: 348)

In this excerpt quoted above, a fictional character, Victor Frankenstein, gives an imagined account of a real situation in which actual individuals took part and which paved the ground for the origin of Mary Shelley’s seminal novel

Frankenstein, thus contributing to blending historical discourses with literary texts to the extent that both are given the same relevance in order to interweave writings that have been customarily regarded as of different nature. The portrayal of actual and fictional episodes at the same time has the effect of endowing the narrative with a faked sense of authenticity, as the reader is able to identify the context in which Mary Shelley's novel began to take shape, thus turning Ackroyd's text into a historical novel, inasmuch as it sheds light on the historical and cultural conditions of the production of the original text.

Ackroyd's postmodern novel especially relies on the rejection of the belief that facts exist independently from the process of thinking, since all discourses are necessarily entangled in social and cultural expectations. In particular, it can also be argued that *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* complies with Jacques Derrida's deconstructive philosophies claiming that there is no such thing as outside the text, and Jean-François Lyotard's incredulity towards grand narratives and their fragmentation by means of literature. In fact, Ackroyd's novel subverts Mary Shelley's narrative to the extent that Victor's confession in his journal, which forms the basis of Ackroyd's text, unveils his unreliability as a narrator, and given the revelation that he is of unsound mind, his story is proved to be deceitful, which inevitably draws attention to the fictional quality of the narrative itself. The knowledge that the basis of Ackroyd's novel lies in the confession of a madman underpins the implausibility of the narrated events, and ultimately, brings to the fore the creative genius of Victor Frankenstein as a Romantic artist. In this respect, Ackroyd's novel also conforms to readings of Mary Shelley's classic that underline the important role that the process of creation acquires all throughout and the part that Victor Frankenstein plays as a creator. As a case in point, Paula Feldman claims that *Frankenstein* is actually a novel about the author's "individual struggle with the act of creation" and "the story of an artist and the artist's progeny" (71), reflecting the fact that Mary Shelley often felt torn between the demands of being a literary creator and a procreator.

3.3.2. The Postmodern Body

From a critical perspective, Ackroyd's novel lays bare cultural discourses related to the body, sexuality, and identity with regard to Victor and the Creature, and calls into question these discourses following postmodern tenets, thus unveiling the Creature's body as postmodern, blurring even further the inherent connection between the Creature and its creator, and hinting at Victor's homosexual identity. Taken as a forerunner of science fiction, *Frankenstein* has been heralded for references to its contextual scientific background and for the use of scientific technologies in order to give birth to the Creature. Nonetheless, as Terrence Holt contends, the process whereby the Creature is born lacks any explicit scientific explanation and is rather conveyed through artistic means, thus acquiring an eminently symbolic quality, ultimately revealing, to use Holt's words, that "the novel's science conceals anxiety about reproduction" (118), as Victor resorts to technological, instead of, sexual reproduction. In the context of postmodernism, the body is characterised as technologically dependent, and in the light of Donna Haraway's ideas, the postmodern body exemplifies the metaphor of the cyborg, which refuses a stable or essentialist identity and welcomes conjoining

contradictions in characterising identity in a similar fashion to the amalgamation of machine and organism exemplified by the figure of the cyborg in a posthuman world. As an example of the postmodern body, the Creature, in its inherent fragmented nature, symbolises a sense of possibility, blurring what is perceived as natural and artificial, as well as what is regarded as normal and deviant, thus metaphorically, the Creature turns into a cyborg, and as such, it is endowed with incredible potency, in relation to the Romantic concept of the superman. In contrast with the characterisation of the Creature in Mary Shelley's novel, though, in Ackroyd's postmodern rewriting, the figure of the Creature corresponds to one single body brought back to life through technological means. Although this undermines the fragmented identity of the Creature, it highlights the virtual quality of its postmodern body.

In Ackroyd's novel, the electrical machine that Victor devises to return the dead back to life is capable of endowing individuals with an unusual strength and powerful traits. As a case in point, Victor becomes aware of the potency he can acquire through his electrical machine as he experiments with himself, thus confessing:

I banged my fist against the wooden side-table by my chair, and at once it splintered into fragments. I seemed to have acquired some fresh access of strength. I went over to the wooden door that separated two of the rooms of the workshop, and with immense ease I struck and shattered one of its panels. I examined my hand with interest, and saw that it was perfectly unharmed by its exertions. I tested it upon the cast-iron stairway leading down into the basement, and realised at once that it was of immense power. The electrical fluid had strengthened it immeasurably, so that I was now capable of curling in my fist a portion of the iron fabric. (Ackroyd 2009: 175)

In contrast with Mary Shelley's novel, in Ackroyd's text Victor also experiments with the machine that gives birth to the body of the Creature and subjects himself to its effects, thus establishing a symbolic closer connection with his creation, to the extent that in *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* the Creature's body cannot be disentangled from that of its creator.

As happens in the original novel, the Creature is also compelled to face prejudices which are biased by cultural constructs and describe the postmodern body of the Creature as disabled. In Ackroyd's novel, the Creature tries to defy this disabling definition by means of producing his own narrative in contrast with that of Victor, and becoming a voice instead of a body – a disembodied voice – through the relationship the Creature maintains with an unnamed family as he conceals himself from their presence, as is also the case with Mary Shelley's original text. However, in Ackroyd's text, the prevalence of the body is underlined when Victor tries to undo the process that gave rise to the Creature by means of destroying the Creature's body with his electrical machine only to find himself unable to put an end to the Creature's life by doing away with his body, as Victor admits frightfully to his dismay,

Again his body trembled and convulsed; there was some scorching of his left leg, and the smell of burning flesh filled the room. He seemed to fall into

unconsciousness, with heavy and stertorous breathing. But still he was not dead. Without seeking his permission I tried a third time; again his flesh was charred, but all the signs of vital life remained. I could not do more. I released the straps by which he had been bound and, without seeing if he could rise, I sat down on a chair facing the window onto the river. I was utterly wearied and defeated. I had failed to destroy him. (Ackroyd 2009: 405)

In *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein*, the body of the Creature is characterised as eminently postmodern, insofar as, in spite of the fact that it is a copy of its former body, it is taken as more real than its original and it attains a sort of proxy immortality, as metaphorically, the body of the Creature becomes a text that is constantly written and rewritten. Likewise, in spite of Victor's will to destroy the body of the Creature, it is ultimately revealed that its body cannot be banished precisely because it merely consists in a mental construct and it only exists in Victor's mind. In Ackroyd's novel, the Creature turns from a disembodied voice to a cyborg or an overwhelming body impossible to destroy, and ultimately, taking into account its actual virtual quality, it finally arises as a hyperreal body.

3.3.3. Victor Frankenstein's Sexuality

Taking into consideration that, in Ackroyd's postmodern novel, it is revealed that the Creature only exists in Victor's mind, it can be argued that, in Ackroyd's reinterpretation of the original story, the Creature becomes the embodiment of Victor's repressed unconscious and instinctive self, particularly inasmuch as the symbolic presence of the Creature appears to be closely related to Victor's inhibited sexual identity. Concerning readings of the Creature in Mary Shelley's novel with respect to gender, feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim that the monster in *Frankenstein* presents many points in common with the Biblical figure of Eve, especially insofar as he is composed of male parts – in analogy with Eve, who was made out of Adam's rib – but also because, upon being abandoned by his creator, the fall of the monster also echoes that of Eve and his marginalisation within the narrative, thus producing an essentially feminist subtext according to Gilbert and Gubar (1979: 224). Also focusing on autobiographical elements spread in the text, critics such as Michael Eberle-Sinatra have underlined Mary Shelley's difficulty in “combining the biological role of mother with the social role of author” (95), and in this respect, Barbara Johnson has referred to Mary Shelley's ambivalent feelings towards motherhood (1987: 62), especially as, in the novel, giving birth is associated with destruction and death. Likewise, taking into account that Victor is the only responsible for the creation process, the narrative also turns into a parody of masculine creation, since, as Fred Botting claims, the violent acts that the monster commits can be interpreted as a result of the return of the repressed female principle in procreation (1991: 48).

Drawing on these critical readings of the original novel in terms of gender, but also establishing a contrast with them, in a display of metatextuality, Ackroyd's novel portrays the Creature as excessively masculine, through traits that have been conventionally associated with traditional masculinity, thus emphasising his power, physicality, and strength, while, it is also significant to notice that, for his investigations, Victor only selects bodies of men, and after having returned the

Creature back to life, he always refers to his creation using the masculine grammatical gender. In comparison with Mary Shelley's novel, the sexual potency of the Creature is made more explicit, since, from the beginning of his experiments, Victor notices that "in the corpses of the younger specimens, the phallus became erect at the slightest excitation and remained in a state of alertness for the duration of the electrical charge" (Ackroyd 2009: 163), thus anticipating the sexual potency of the Creature.

Critics of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, such as Paula Feldman, have noticed "the asexuality of Frankenstein and the implied sexuality of his Creature" (69) and this premise becomes even more noticeable in Ackroyd's text. In *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein*, in contrast with the sexual potency that characterises the Creature, Victor remains detached from any sort of relationship, as, his half-sister, Elizabeth Lavenza, whom Victor marries in Mary Shelley's novel, dies very early in Ackroyd's text, even before Victor starts experimenting with the limits of life and death, and it can be argued that it is precisely because of her premature demise that Victor feels eager to return the dead back to life. In comparison with Mary Shelley's original narrative, in Ackroyd's novel, Victor never establishes any explicit romantic relationship with Elizabeth and at no time does he get married. Nonetheless, he develops a very close friendship with the poet Percy Shelley to the extent that, in several instances, it is suggested that Victor may even feel romantically attracted towards Percy, thus unveiling Victor's homosexual identity in a subtle way. As a case in point, when Victor receives Percy's letter informing him about his elopement with Harriet Westbrook and his intention to marry her, Victor describes his bitter feelings as follows:

For some reason I felt close to tears. Perhaps it was a reminder to me of the life I used to lead, before my immersion in dangerous experiment; perhaps it represented to me the pleasures of married life and of human intercourse. I realised, too, that I still missed the presence of Bysshe. His was the one true companionship I had ever formed – my one friend and ally in this world, where there is so much harm and darkness. (Ackroyd 2009: 146)

Bearing in mind that Victor's feelings towards his friend Percy Shelley are suggestive of his latent homosexuality, the manifest masculine traits that the Creature exemplifies clash with those of Victor. In fact, it is significant to notice that the Creature slays Percy's first wife Harriet, and when Percy is engaged to marry Mary Godwin, she almost becomes the Creature's next victim, as if Victor's creation embodied his creator's repressed unconscious sexual feelings, especially with regard to Victor's romantic attraction towards Percy.

3.3.4. The Actual Presence of the Double

Drawing on the intricate connection between Victor and the Creature, in a further display of metatextuality, Ackroyd's novel also echoes critical readings of Mary Shelley's original text that have focused on interpreting the Creature as Victor's symbolic double. Having regarded *Frankenstein* as a representative literary work within the modern fantastic, critic Rosemary Jackson reinforces the consideration of the Creature as Victor's double, claiming that, in Mary Shelley's novel, the

figure of the other is not supernatural, but rather represents an externalisation of part of the self (1981: 55). In fact, in relation to the inherent bond established between Frankenstein and his creation, Paula Feldman contends that “the Creature is forced to lead a life of his own, acting out what Victor is struggling to keep from consciousness” (1992: 68). Likewise, focusing on the relation between the Creature and Victor’s identity, critic Mary Thornburg argues that, while the Creature notices his bond with his creator, Victor is never totally aware of his inherent connection with the Creature (1987: 7), but it is significant to notice that Victor’s evolution as a character finds its counterpart in the Creature’s progression, since, when Victor becomes more inhuman, the Creature acquires more humanity, whereas when Victor turns into a more vulnerable character, the Creature gains further strength. This intrinsic relation between creator and creation has contributed to critical debates that bring to the fore which character can be considered as the real villain of the story. By the end of Ackroyd’s novel, this discussion that arose in critical interpretations of Mary Shelley’s original novel is finally elucidated, as it is unveiled that Victor, instead of the Creature, is the only character to blame.

In *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein*, there are different episodes in which Victor suggests that he feels a special kind of connection with the Creature, while it is the Creature himself who explicitly mentions he might act as Victor’s symbolic double. In the course of his ponderings, Victor admits that “it astonished me that the Creature had arrived at conclusions similar to my own; it was as if there were a connection between us that surpasses the ordinary powers of sympathy” (Ackroyd 2009: 373), while the Creature himself confesses to his creator that “I am wedded to you so closely that we might be the same person” (Ackroyd 2009: 252). The figure of the double reverberates all through Ackroyd’s novel, since, during the stay of the Shelleys, Lord Byron, Doctor Polidori, and Victor Frankenstein in Geneva, Percy Shelley unfolds an autobiographical story describing an episode in his youth in which he faced his own image while he was sailing. Through a literary psychoanalytical approach, the fact of staring at one’s double involves that death is close at hand for the character, and in Ackroyd’s novel, Percy Shelley’s narrative of beholding his own image symbolically foretells his own death, while it draws him closer to his friend Victor Frankenstein, who also feels threatened by the overwhelming presence of his double. As Doctor Polidori grows interested in Victor’s case and he turns into Polidori’s patient, it becomes more evident that the Creature only exists in Victor’s mind and that Victor should be held as sole responsible for all the murders. In fact, as a physician, it is Doctor Polidori who informs Victor that the Creature only lives in his imagination and that he believes that Victor’s insanity might be rooted in his wish to emulate Percy Shelley or Lord Byron. In fact, to use Doctor Polidori’s words in the novel, he hints at Victor “perhaps you wished to rival Bysshe—or Byron—you had longings for sublimity and power” (Ackroyd 2009: 407). Doctor Polidori’s medical diagnosis of Victor involves one of the major contributions of Ackroyd’s novel to the myth of Frankenstein, as not only does it show that Victor is the only villain of the story and that he is mentally ill, but it also characterises Victor as an eminently Romantic artist, thus transforming Victor Frankenstein into a fictionalised Romantic poet such as Percy Shelley or Lord Byron.

4. Conclusion

Taking into account that the story of Frankenstein has evolved into a modern myth, its basic narrative has been the object of multiple rearrangements and readaptations, favouring the likes of contemporary audiences and incorporating tenets from emerging critical theories in the course of time. Peter Ackroyd's novel *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein*—the most recent literary revision of Mary Shelley's classic to date—provides a postmodern revision of the original text, which brings to the fore its own artificiality through resorting to examples of metafiction that blend historical events and actual individuals with fictional episodes and literary characters, but also contribute to endow Ackroyd's text with a faked sense of authenticity given its recurrent references to actual episodes that gave shape to Mary Shelley's novel. By means of the analysis of different variants of transtextuality, this article has given evidence of how Ackroyd's revision of *Frankenstein* pays homage to Mary Shelley's classic, expands on its basic story and introduces outstanding modifications in terms of structure, while, through resorting to tenets taken from different critical readings used to approach Mary Shelley's novel, Ackroyd's text also incorporates important twists in the plot of the original story. Through examples of metatextuality, *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* juxtaposes historical discourses with fictional episodes, which allows reading the narrative through the background that gave rise to the story, to the extent that reality is placed at the same level as fiction. Likewise, Ackroyd's novel approaches the Creature as an eminently postmodern body, matching the postmodern concept of simulacrum, which involves that, in spite of the fact that the body is taken as a copy, it becomes more real than its original, thus turning into a metaphor of Mary Shelley's story itself and its subsequent adaptations, in particular, through its ultimate virtual quality. Ackroyd's revision of this classic also tackles Victor Frankenstein's sexuality, and even if subtly, hints at his homosexuality, given his underrated attraction towards Percy Shelley, thus taking over gender readings of *Frankenstein* that underline Victor's apparent refusal of his heterosexual relationship with Elizabeth Lavenza. Above all, though, Ackroyd's novel resorts to psychoanalytical interpretations of *Frankenstein* that have often approached the Creature as Victor's double, since in *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein*, the Creature becomes an actual invention of Victor's demented mind, and therefore, Victor's literal double, as a result of his Romantic imagination, thus portraying Victor as an eminently Romantic bard—in the same way as Percy Shelley and Lord Byron. These modifications in Ackroyd's adaptation give evidence of Ackroyd's contribution to updating the myth of Frankenstein in the light of different critical readings through which *Frankenstein* has been approached, turning it into a postmodern myth.

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