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**The Experience of Difference:
(in)Tension and Realisation in Theodore Roszak's
*The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein***

Subject to frequent adaptations, re-readings and alterations Mary Shelley's celebrated narrative does not only take a significant place in the canon of famously re-interpretable literary works, but – perhaps due to its unquestionable richness in terms of themes and motives – also constitutes one of the central and most powerful texts in contemporary culture. With countless rewritings in yet newer and newer versions, including those for other media, the original story of 'the Modern Prometheus'¹ has become a text pervading contemporary popular consciousness and culture. Theodore Roszak's *The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein*² is one of such reworkings of the nineteenth-century classic. It aims to present the original story from the perspective of Victor Frankenstein's unfortunate bride who, in Shelley's novel, is offered a relatively modest attention, as it is the male voices that dominate the original.

Made famous by his *Making of the Counterculture* (1968), a thorough study of the youth movement in the late sixties, Theodore Roszak (1933-2011) was an American professor of history and a Mary Shelley scholar who indeed came to see Frankenstein as an embodiment of one of the central myths of the modern society. This, in a way, not only fits into Shelley's own critique of science portrayed in the novel but also reflects his explorations of its underside – an interest visible already in his early work which was to define the term 'counterculture' and to probe the nature/technology opposition.

In *The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein* Roszak is clear about his purpose from the very beginning. His retelling of the original explicitly links the author with the figure of Elizabeth, Victor Frankenstein's tragic fiancée, and aims to create a sup-

¹ M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. By J. Paul Hunter, W.W. Norton & Company, New York-London 1996.

² T. Roszak, *The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein*, Bantam Books/Random House, Inc. New York 1996 [1995]; the text used in throughout the article is the 1996 paperback edition.

posedly unrestrained discourse on the matters of Western science to show its entanglement in gender politics. The text can further be seen as an attempt to (re)create female experience, paradoxically constructed by a male author. Nearly after two hundred years since the publication of Shelley's work a contemporary author thus resorts to similar narrative pattern, hoping that in his speaking 'as the bride of Frankenstein, she [Mary Shelley] will at last find the voice she was not free to adopt in her own day'³. Unfortunately, Roszak's choice of the narrative position – intended to give voice to a woman in order to provide a sustained critique of the dominant patriarchal theoretical-scientific paradigm – is crooked from the onset and ends up still speaking for the 'other sex'. His discursive organisation seems to replicate the inequality because of still relying on the very model of thinking and expression which inevitably leads to a subjugation of one element in a given binary which in the end still replicates the subjugated female positioning. Regardless of authorial intentions, such orientation of the narrative discourse further contrasts the numerous theoretical developments of feminism(s) (including LGBT, queer or postcolonial discourses, to name only some positions) arguing against the very binary thinking, i.e. conceptualising the difference through underprivileged positioning of the cultural Other. In this vein, while this is not necessarily the case for other works by the critic (cf. for example the controversial study of sexual politics of science entitled *The Gendered Atom*⁴), in what follows I argue that despite the noble intentions Roszak's attempt at granting voice to the underprivileged is a failed one due to blatant overlooking of the developments of difference feminism and, among others, of an inability to employ a more truly female mode of writing, for instance associated with the idea of *écriture féminine*.

Roszak's outspoken and deliberate choice of female narrative voice entangles his narrative in aspects of gender, difference and female experience. The novel as such seems to be based on a fundamental paradox lying between the intention (to grant her 'the voice she was not free to adopt in her own day') and realisation, i.e. the manner in which the text actually manifests the difference between the perspective and experience of a woman, as contrasted with that of a man. In the narrative the textualisation of experience is conveyed through the respective variances in the very model of writing or shifts in the narrative voice or perspective. The main difference however that the text seems to explore is organised along the traditional crude binary⁵ of the masculine (rational, Enlightenment science) and the feminine (natural and spirited alchemy). Thus, despite Roszak's professed purpose of the vindication of feminist issues the means used to represent these aspects are largely stereotypical and rest mostly within the range of stock images and metaphors, largely limited to the equation of femininity with nature. Correspondingly, the main line of contrast is

³ T. Roszak, *ibid.*, p. VIII.

⁴ T. Roszak, *The Gendered Atom. Reflections on the Sexual Psychology of Science*, Conari Press, Berkeley, California 1999.

⁵ For such positioning in M. Shelley's original see A. K. Mellor [1988], *Possessing Nature: The Female in 'Frankenstein' in M. Shelley, Frankenstein*, ed. By J. Paul Hunter, W.W. Norton & Company, New York-London 1996, pp. 274-286.

drawn between technocratic science and Enlightenment, associated with Victor and nature, romanticism and femininity ascribed to Elizabeth⁶.

Doubtlessly, as a scholar, Roszak is intensely aware of the importance of the binaries that structure his hovel and he constructs the difference between science and femininity as nature by employing the types of knowledge throughout the narrative so as to further strengthen his argument about 'how science, in its passionate search for power, has twisted our relationship to nature'⁷. For him, it the scientist that

stands at the centre of Shelley's tale, the man of reason, swept away by a twisted passion that is at once intellectual and sexual. The female victim is his bride, murdered before the marriage can be consummated. The monster is a creature of the hero's own making, in the effect, his unnatural son. Bonds of filial and matrimonial love tie the characters together, connecting them all to 'a workshop of filthy creation,' as Mary Shelley called the first experimental laboratory to appear in literature⁸.

In Roszak's book science and technology stand in stark opposition to nature and 'feminine' powers. The post-Enlightenment rationalism is conceptualised here in terms of masculinity and rendered in a thoroughly negative and intrusive manner. The image of the violating obstetrics in the above-mentioned delivery scene is immediately fenced off with the editorial remarks from Walton quoting professional expert on the medical matters – needless to say, a man. Such monstrosity and perverted, inhumane appearance of the 'men of science' who violate nature and its rules are equally frequent throughout the whole narrative.

The discrepancy between the novel's aims and effects or meanings constructed in the text is, however, visible already at the level of its narrative organisation. Part of the unwaning power of Shelley's work undoubtedly lies in the fact that it lends itself to a whole host of interpretations, many of which concern autobiographical writing. However, writing about oneself – or writing oneself, as Hélène Cixous⁹ suggested – in the case of women's writing is a much more complicated affair. As Barbara Johnson asserted already in the early eighties, scholarly trends in the study of literature and *Frankenstein* concern 'the question of mothering, the question of the woman writer, and the question of autobiography'¹⁰. Indeed, the telling of life stories, in a form of an account of one's life experiences certainly lies at the core of Shelley's classic. The arctic explorer Sir Robert Walton narrates the story of the obsessed scientist Victor Frankenstein who in turn is also told a story by his own monstrous creation. Roszak

⁶ Cf. M. Poovey [1984], 'My Hideous Progeny': *the Lady and the Monster*, [in:] M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. By J. Paul Hunter, W.W. Norton & Company, New York-London 1996, pp. 251-261.

⁷ T. Roszak 1999, op. cit., p. 16.

⁸ T. Roszak, *ibid.*, p. 2.

⁹ Cf. H. Cixous, Hélène [1976]. *The Laugh of the Medusa*, [in:] V. B. Leitch et al. (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, W.W. Norton, New York & London 2001, pp. 2039-2056.

¹⁰ B. Johnson, *My Monster/My Self*, [in:] M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. By J. Paul Hunter, W.W. Norton & Company, New York-London 1996, pp. 241-251.

rests his novel on a similar pattern where the notion of perspective acquires even more importance because the numerous prefaces and author's or editor's notes which seem to hold the novel together.

In the contemporary retelling Robert Walton reappears in a position of authority as the editor of the eponymous memoirs who leads the reader through the diaries of Elizabeth Lavenza, Victor Frankenstein's adopted sister and eventual wife.

My steadfast allegiance to the ideal of scientific objectivity. This alone, the cherished habit of a lifetime spent in the service of truth, strengthened me in an endeavour that moral revulsion might have persuaded me to abandon. In that spirit I lay this report before the world, confident of the candid public will not mistake my true purpose, which is the defence of Reason and the vindication of Moral Rectitude¹¹.

It is from his preface that we learn how he obtained the diaries from Ernest Frankenstein, the last surviving member of the close family in 1806. Walton's explanatory comments serve as a sort of skeleton-frame, which not only traces Elizabeth's origins (aristocratic mother's death at giving birth, early days with an Italian Romany caravan and subsequent adoption and introduction to a prominent Swiss family, the Frankensteins) but also provide a scientific, masculinised contrast with the free and natural thinking of women depicted in the novel¹².

Walton's 'editor's notes', with their condescending view of women and admiration for 'manly' science, provide a sound framework which is not so much a link to Shelley's novel but serves to contrast the main discourse on gender relations and the nature of modern science. In fact, this aspect of the gendered perspective resurfaces from the opening of the book with the description of Elizabeth's origins, depicted in the scene of a recurring dream about her birth in which she says 'I am as if divided in two. Two pairs of eyes, two sensibilities'¹³. The duality described here corresponds to two positions she takes in the book: that of a spectator, watching the woman in labour pains, lying 'torn by the anguish of difficult birth', and the second position – described as '*another* me' – a 'powerless unformed babe that lodges inside of a woman's anguished body'¹⁴. These perspectives – that of a spectator and a participant – mark the trajectory of the novel and allow Elizabeth the observer, especially in the first parts of the novel to learn 'the ways of women' largely through the observation of her foster mother, Caroline Frankenstein, a liberal free-thinking secret practitioner of alchemical magic, who envisages a supernatural fusion between Victor and Elizabeth, her two children.

Even though Roszak's book centres on differences and oppositions, the message of unity is likewise visible and also frequently exposed with the means of perspective:

¹¹ T. Roszak 1996, op. cit., p. XVI-XVII.

¹² Cf. H. Cixous, H      , op. cit., pp. 104-121.

¹³ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 5.

After I had been admitted to the mysteries of women, this was how I came to see Belrive in its spiritual nature. More than a stately mansion, the estate was a crux in time where two great currents of life converged... Father was mind, science, invention: the force of revolutionary endeavour [...]; surrounding [his] island of Enlightenment, where the dark forests and secret glades that had been there from the beginning, older even than the bones of that barbarian kings who lay sleeping at our foundations. That encompassing darkness was the second Belrive – Mother's Belrive, a stream that issued from deep in the Earth, bearing memories of primordial ways. [...]

'Only these two taken together, the questing current and the river of remembrance, made the true Belrive'. Not only male, and only female; combination of the two elements on both mother and father, respectively. [M: 121-122].

The fragment provides a good example of masculine and feminine energies and their gender associations – male rationality vs. female secrets of Nature – as well as the way in which experience (of having been introduced into the secrets of women) affects (visual) perception. Despite the union call for both powers, what should be clear by now however is that these oppositions, in their overt genderification, may be potentially problematic when, as it is the case in the novel, they are employed in an uncritical manner. Nevertheless, Tanya Collings¹⁵ believes the story to be especially effective in suggesting a peaceful resolution, possible to be achieved only when the masculine and feminine energies are united.

This is for instance visible in the case of Victor's mother, Lady Caroline, who arranges his and Elizabeth's marriage when they are little. Lady Caroline has an extensive background in a liberal society of women and follows secret, pagan and organic rituals which go back to times immemorial. She introduces the children to such centuries-old customs and teachings, insisting on natural honour and respect towards the Earth. The eternal matriarchal spirituality merges with the mysterious and Byzantine tenets of alchemy. Here the elements of far Eastern philosophies and tantric sexual rituals intertwine with mathematics and logics. Victor however, bears a strong influence from his father side which makes his mind become easily infused with the developments in eighteenth-century science. He willingly explores the most important philosophies of the Age of Reason which express a deeply patriarchal organisation of existence: man (and not a woman) is a pinnacle of the natural world and it is in harnessing the natural powers for the benefit of humanity that his fate is performed.

Lady Caroline, in turn, presents an alternative to the dominating and colonising powers of the Western rational and masculinised science not only in the type of knowledge she deals with but also through opposition to the orderly and objective characteristics endemic to the Enlightenment ideals. Here again the novel seems to work on the well-established elements of the feminist critical discourse, since Caro-

¹⁵ T. Collings, *Frankenstein and Feminism: Contemplating the 'Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein'*, [in:] *Anthropology of Consciousness*, vol. 22. Issue 1, 2011, 'American Anthropological Association', pp. 66-68.

line Frankenstein owns what could be termed in Woolfian terms 'a room of her own'. It is not only located in an attic of the Belrive mansion, the Frankenstein household, but also functions as her workshop – an alternative for the well-known workshops in which (male) scientists conduct their experiments. Moreover, Caroline is an artist who paints pictures¹⁶ which shock young Elizabeth with their daring portrayal of naked female bodies in various unusual situations like witchcraft rituals or giving birth. She is also liberated in terms of sexuality – a fact Elizabeth can observe in a voyeuristic scene of the foster-mother's intimate contacts with a lady-friend¹⁷.

Despite the apparent differences in the portrayal of men and women, the unfolding of the novel intends to bring feminine energies into balance by encouraging Elizabeth and Victor to form a 'Chymical Marriage'. Such a marriage 'represents the successful amalgamation of technology/masculinity and nature/femininity', but which at the same time, 'cannot exist without equal participation of both Victor and Elizabeth, just as ecological balance cannot be achieved without the commensurate efforts of both masculine and feminine energies'¹⁸. However, impatient with the slow, female, organic form that the whole process of the Chymical Marriage necessarily takes, Victor eventually violates Elizabeth physically. This traumatic act of rape is presented however in the form of 'a rite beyond their current abilities' which Tanya Collings sees as a 'dramatic scene [which] exemplifies the industrial degradation of our planet and the resulting disassociation between humankind and the rest of the natural world'¹⁹. Victor's drive for tangible results, motivated by sexual exploitation – regardless of the his love for Elizabeth – can thus be seen as the process of man's exploitation of nature, leading to its (her) ultimate death and destruction. Before her death however Elizabeth has the following vision:

I see the death of the world.
 I see great machines in the womb of the Earth.
 And I see the mountains crumbling.
 And I see great Nature humbled.
 And I hear the sky roaring with an iron voice.
 And I see Earth sprout a deadly garden of billowing fume, by tens and hundreds
 great blossoming flowers of fire.
 And I hear the electricity speak with a million of voices.
 And I see men building cities that have no need of sun and moon. [...]
 And I see the men making creatures of their own manipulation.
 And I see the men breeding without women.
 And I see monsters bowing down to their makers and rising up against them²⁰.

¹⁶ T. Roszak 1996, op. cit., p. 62-67.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 68-73.

¹⁸ T. Collings 2011, op. cit., p. 67.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 67.

²⁰ T. Roszak 1996, op. cit., pp. 420-421.

This apocalyptic, pre-terminal vision echoes with sights and sounds of the female Earth and nature stripped of dignity by the outcomes of technological progress. According to Collings, Roszak voices a strong and clear message: 'if we continue on our current path, we will eventually destroy the very planet that supports and gives us life'²¹. He recognises that the discursive formation of Enlightenment science – in its operations of discoveries and findings – was deeply a masculine and patriarchal construct. It followed the myth of Nature as a woman – one which can be possessed and exploited. As the critic contends, *The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein* is a poetic retelling of the consequences associated with the overgrowth of post-Enlightenment rationalism and the associated stifling of the feminine force within all of us, which – through Roszak's imagination – opens our eyes more fully to the issue at hand – to the origin of our ecological crisis and our failed attempts to create effective solution²². Contrastingly, since the discussion of the politics of science is not carried out in a straightforward manner, but is couched in a set of complementing oppositions which are finally united, one might observe that the message Roszak's book also conveys is that these propositions need a gendered and sexual veneer. Yet, the use of clichéd imagery (e.g. women as a spiritual sect indulging in various bizarre pagan practices) is also striking to the point of banality.

While there are clearly sound reasons behind Roszak's novel to criticize the growth of Enlightenment rationality as a patriarchal discourse, the means used to render and effect a different state of things fail. The attempt of a male author at using a female voice to criticise the gender bias of science simply turns out to replicate the inequality. Despite the undeniable literary skill exhibited in the text, the novel is largely silent about any mode of (or attempts at rendering) female experience in any subversive form or content. Even though this is not a drawback in itself, the novel seems to explore a similar narrative mode as Mary Shelley's original. However, it seems to overlook the propositions put forward already some time ago by difference feminists, (e.g. Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, to name a few). In fact, the text does very little to subvert the patriarchal domination (for example in the form of *écriture féminine*) and any attempts at putting the 'feminine' into the language or writing are virtually non-existent or rest on stereotypical Nature-assorted imagery. Consequently, one paradoxical conclusion might be that even though the 1818 original proves it otherwise, Roszak's book may illustrate Cixous' claim that 'Woman must write woman. And man, man'²³.

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²¹ T. Collings 2011, op. cit., p. 67.

²² Ibid., p. 68.

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The Experience of Difference: (in)Tension and Realisation in Theodore Roszak's *The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein*

Abstract: The article looks at Theodore Roszak's *The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein* from the perspective of an attempt at privileging female narrative voice, largely overlooked in Mary Shelley's original. It is argued that despite noble aims the author's reliance on stereotypical binaries (man-science/woman-nature) effectively silences the developments of significant strains of feminist critical discourses. Such an approach - together with exploring the otherwise reversed, but still biased binary male/female oppositions - accounts for an ineffective attempt at (re)creation of female experience.

Keywords: Frankenstein, female experience, perspective, difference