THE MONSTER'S VOICE

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■ **ABSTRACT:** Notes upon the Gothic monster as a metaphor for postmodern identities, followed by an analysis of Margaret Atwood's short story "*Lusus naturae*" in its echoes of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, as a way of developing the aforementioned hypothesis.

■ **KEYWORDS:** Abjection. *Frankenstein*. Gothic monster. Margaret Atwood. Postmodern identities.

I would like to strike up this essay by asking a question: what is left of the Gothic monster in the postmodern text? Notable monstrous characters have sprung up in Gothic literature since its earliest days in the eighteenth century, and especially in the nineteenth: ghostly apparitions, perverse monks, madwomen, vicious strangers, evil incarnations, vampires, hybrids, *doppelgängers*, and, ultimately, the epitome of the monster - the creature of *Frankenstein*. Most of the participants on this old-fashioned parade have already been naturalized in our collective unconscious, and one might even say that they are now devoid of a truly frightening potential, were it not for its inexhaustible ability to signal the fears and anxieties of each new era. It seems to be impossible to confine the monster for eternity into the rusty Gothic romances of the past. As a matter of fact, the most emblematic monstrous characters have often come back from yonder in disguise, in the manner of a repressed impulse bursting forth from the unconscious; and still, disguised as they may be, their underlying meanings remain astoundingly familiar. Times may go by, and still the monster will stalk the boundaries of literature, demanding that we recognize its existence, hear its voice, and remove it from its place of abjection[1] - a task that we repeatedly refuse to fulfill. The monster will be defeated over and over. Its access to discourse, rarefied. Its claim to the center, invalidated.

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[1] Whenever "abjection" is mentioned in this essay, it is to be understood according to Julia Kristeva's (1982) description. She explains that the abject corresponds to everything that is thrown out (in social and psychic terms) for the maintenance and strengthening of the coherence and order of a community through the solidification of norms of behavior. The concept is fundamental to a number of readings of Gothic monstrosity, as well as to the structuring of Judith Butler's gender identity theory, and therefore important for our gender-oriented reading of Margaret Atwood's "*Lusus naturae*".

The first problem to be tackled when searching for an answer to my kick-off question is that of definition: who, or what, could be designated as a monster? The monster is thus defined by the *Oxford Dictionary*: "1. a large, ugly, and frightening imaginary creature; 1.1. an inhumanly cruel or wicked person; 2. a thing of extraordinary and daunting size; 3. a congenitally malformed or mutant animal or plant"[2]. These are rather generic definitions, that is a fact, but I suggest we keep them at hand for an ulterior deconstruction. It is also a fact that the definitions at issue place us in the face of negative attributes that relate to various fields of knowledge: the folklore, the aesthetics, the ethics, the genetics and philosophy. Hence it is possible to extract from them two different notions: first and foremost, by taking the place of the negative pole within an evaluative paradigm, the monster is always the disqualified term in the binary metaphysical systems that establish the production of sense and identities in the West; secondly, the monster derives its monstrosity from the agglutination of disparate attributes that make it an ultra-complex figure, one that suits as a metaphor[3] for a diverse number of artistic, cultural, and biological phenomena.

I suggest that we should linger for the moment in the profitable field of dictionary definitions, so as to unfold a few aspects of the interesting figure of the monster which might be neglected in an ever-failing attempt to endow it with a proper voice. Célia Magalhães (2003, p. 24) explains that the term "monster" derives from the Latin *monstrare*, meaning "divine omen, wonder or portent, signal", whose root comes from the verb *monere*, "to warn, to caution, to advise". Therefore, in the context of the Greco-Roman mythology, the monster was considered to be a marvelous being, wondrous for its rarity, to which important tutelary functions were assigned, since it was generally taken as an alert against the risks of an approaching evil, or else as a manifestation of a godly wish. Likewise, numerous descriptions in the classical mythology present it as a creature made of multiplied parts, or rather as the magical result of a sexual transgression, one which would originate such mythological beings as the chimeras, the sphinxes, and the centaurs, gigantic hybrids usually born from the sexual intercourses between gods and humans, or gods and animals.

It is true that in modern figurations the monster has retained the ability to represent the transgression of boundaries, becoming, as stated by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996, p. 06), the true harbinger of the category crisis, even though its aura of wonder has been promptly undermined during the rediscovery of the Greeks and Romans in the Renaissance. This was due to the medieval legacies of a Judeo-Christian

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[2]   The definition is available at https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/monster .

[3]   Very important considerations on the monster as a metaphor can be found in the essay "Monstros como metáforas do mal" by Julio Jeha (2007), published in *Monstros e monstruosidades na literatura*, a collection of essays organized by the same author.

morality, obsessed with the production of well-defined categories of classification, and determined to punish all sorts of transgressions. Thus it seems appropriate to understand that the monster should become a threatening being, coming to represent evil through metaphors of crimes, sins and monstrosities (JEHA, 2007), which are meant to be understood as transgressions of legal, moral and aesthetic order respectively, ones that would endure so far out in time as to witness the emergence of the many monstrous characters in the Gothic novels of a few centuries later.

Several scholars agree to date the rise of the early Gothic back to the eighteenth century, more precisely since the publication of Horace Walpole's *The castle of Otranto*, in 1764, having the so-called Gothic romances seen the end of their heydays in 1818, when Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley gave birth to her *magnum opus*, *Frankenstein*. The blossoming of an initial Gothic tradition overlaps with the period in which, according to Fred Botting (1996, p. 21), morality and monstrosity were the touchstone of aesthetic judgment, and any representations that should escape the regularity attributed to nature, or deny the privileged forms that marked the artistic taste in the period of the Enlightenment, were to be described as monstrous. Needless to say, numerous authors within the Gothic genre would struggle to bring back to life those aspects of art and spirituality of which the excessive rationalism of the Enlightenment disapproved. During this period, in which literature not only served as a means of entertainment, but also lent itself to the task of instructing its readers on the dangers of moral vices and the benefits of virtues, monsters were brought about in the pages of Gothic novels as strong reminders that terrible punishments may ensue as the inexorable consequence of the heretic abuses of sexuality, the violation of strict norms of moral behavior, the trespassing of borders, and the exaggerations of fantasy.

Undoubtedly, *Frankenstein* responds to these dilemmas inasmuch as it can be read as a ferocious alert against the risks of acquiring forbidden knowledge or, as Julio Jeha (2009, p. 14-15) explains, of excessive curiosity and pride clashing against a society of obscurantist religious beliefs. The novel's nameless antagonist incorporates the very aesthetic excesses which render him monstrous and damnable, thus embodying deformity and ugliness and suffering rejection in both the eyes of his father and those of society itself. Rejection and loneliness turn him into a social outcast and lead him to commit unspeakable crimes, hence making him into a metaphor for both moral and aesthetic transgression. Nevertheless, Ellen Moers (1985) would rather read the novel as a birth myth, or else as a metaphor for pregnancy and motherhood as instruments of female oppression which ultimately permeate women's writing as motivating impulses and particularizing brands. Such reading, among many others[4], evades the **aesthetic** issues that prevailed in the

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[4] Further readings tend to interpret Frankenstein's monster from an ethical rather than aesthetic perspective. As Judith Halberstam (1995, p. 29) notes: "The monster, in various readings then, is

seventeen hundreds, by pointing out, in contrast, an **ethical** issue that challenges the obvious limitations fostered by the highly problematic historiographical precision which delimits the pinnacle of the Gothic tradition. It is very significant that *Frankenstein*, the most perennial and emblematic narrative of the monster, should so often be mentioned as the closing chapter of the first wave of Gothic. The novel has actually very little of an epilogue; it would rather mark a transition between the founding texts from the eighteenth century, in which monstrosity would most often come across as a metaphor for aesthetic excess and moral vice, and the many nineteenth-century narratives engaged in the production of infinite monstrous figures as a response to the changing conception of identity.

The connection of monstrosity to identity is blatant in *Frankenstein*. After reading *The sorrows of young Werther* and secretly observing the routine of an expatriate family from whom he learns the nature of social bonds, Mary Shelley's creature asks poignantly, "Who was I? What was I?" (SHELLEY, 2003, p. 128). The answer to this deeply existential question sets the creature in his full monstrosity: the monstrous being is everything which the others are not; or which they may run the risk of becoming; or which they may have already become, albeit reluctantly; it is everything that threatens them from the threshold. The questioning turns out to be one of a metaphysical order: the nature or substance of identity seems to be the monster that haunts Gothic texts from *Frankenstein* onwards.

Judith Halberstam (1995) believes that monsters are metaphors for the engineering of modern subjects[5] within binary paradigms of production of sense, operating as a conciliatory midterm which emerges mainly in times of crisis. Thereby it could not have been by accident that *Frankenstein* should first be published in the nineteenth century, an era of radical epistemological crises that have greatly challenged the autonomy of the Cartesian subject and paved the way for the upcoming postmodern representations of fragmented and fluid identities. From the eighteen hundreds on, Sigmund Freud's description of the unconscious, along with Karl Marx's analysis of class struggles and the division of labor within the systems of production, in addition to the structuring of the many republics and their increasing ideas of nationalism, which led to an horde of upcoming endeavors

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literature, women's creativity, Mary Shelley herself; the monster is class struggle, the product of industrialization, a representation of the proletariat; the monster is all social struggle, a specific symbol of the French Revolution, the power of the masses unleashed; the monster is technology, the danger of science without conscience, the autonomous machine". The novel is indeed a highly complex work that opens up to a number of possible interpretations - hence, perhaps, its inexhaustible presence in the Western imaginary.

5   Modern subjectivities have been described by Stuart Hall (2006) as the identity paradigm in the Enlightenment, one that validates the cognitive, self-conscious, rational subject that inhabits the center of knowledge. In opposition to this paradigm, another one has been erected in late-modernity, namely, the postmodern (fluid, fragmented, changing, imprecise, indeterminate) identities.

to establish the policies for New Imperialism, not to mention the first wave of the feminist movement, have all laid down deep questions about the autonomy of the cognoscent subject and their prerogatives of power. As Hall (2006, p. 11) points out, the idea of an essential identity was progressively replaced by that of a more complex one, conceived in relational terms, and later by the fluid, fragmented and multiple postmodern identities.

What are the implications of this paradigm shift? The first one is clearly the need to recognize that the monster's deformed and mutant body is, as Cohen (1996, p. 07) wants it, a cultural body onto which difference is inscribed: "Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual". The monster therefore personifies the constitutive outside[6] of gender, race, class and national identities, among others. The second one is that the very existence of the monster, an inhabitant of the edges of culture, weakens the place of center attributed to socially validated identities and, consequently, the very space of abjection where it is forced to belong. By taking up this political responsibility, the monster pleads for voice at the core of a community that insists on silencing it in order to benefit authoritarian institutions and socially validated notions of subjectivity.

Let us keep this hypothesis in mind: the voice of the Gothic monster soars high as a claim at the validation of its identity via discourse, within a community that seeks to subdue its strength. In spite of such an audacious request, Michel Foucault (1981) explains that discourse is structured according to a given order, to which not all have equal access. It operates by means of insidious principles of rarefaction, interdiction, coercion and control, so as to ward off full access to its production and to configure speechmaking as a way of exercising power. When access to speech is forbidden, the abject condition of the one pleading for voice is reenacted. It is to be expected, therefore, that whenever the monster's howl rises from the edges of sense, urging us to bear witness to the fragility and provisionality of our own identities, abjection again takes over and drives that voice out onto a space of muteness, thus reestablishing social order and human cohesion. The monster is denied the right to discourse. Its voice must be interdicted. When it finally makes itself heard, its vindication is invalidated. In this conflict of unstoppable movements lies its complexity.

The foucauldian-oriented study of how one comes to be a subject has been radicalized in postmodern philosophy, ever since both Judith Butler (1990) and Stuart Hall (2006) came up with the new paradigm of performative, fluid and

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6   I am considering this concept as it is discussed by Judith Butler (1993), in *Bodies that matter*. In this essay, she explains that any identity, especially gender identities, can only be amenable to existence in contrast with everything else that they exclude by means of violent processes of abjection.

fragmented identities. In postmodernity, the Gothic monster has grown to be the epitome of shattered and mutant identities, challenging the solid and unchangeable subjectivities inherited from the Enlightenment. Laying hands on it has become increasingly difficult, since the monster has made itself evanescent and mutable. It is a complementary feature of postmodern fictional strategies to establish a parodic reading of tradition through "historiographic metafiction" (HUTCHEON, 2004), a means of reworking the conventions of past narratives in order to problematize them further. This strategy is carried out, for instance, in the fiction of Margaret Atwood, whose stories often benefit from the conventions of Gothic and the emergence of monstrous characters. Her latest collection of short stories, *Stone mattress* (2014), bespeaks the writer's passion for the horrific and the uncanny, frightening effects scattered over nine tales that explore, in addition to monstrosity, subject matters such as madness, revenge, imprisonment, and eugenics.

There is a tale in *Stone mattress* that strikes me as the most curious: I am talking about "*Lusus naturae*", the shortest story in the collection, though probably one of the most thought-provoking. It is a brief first-person narrative that, without ever explicitly mentioning *Frankenstein*, works as a postmodern parody of this exemplary novel. To understand how this rereading is articulated, we need to remember the format in which Mary Shelley delivers her story: the novel's frame narrative is comprised of the letters of Captain Robert Walton, an explorer who travels the inhospitable regions of the North Pole, addressed to his sister Margaret, letters in which he reveals his encounter with the title character and, in the end, with the monstrous creature himself. Within these letters, he transcribes to his sister the account of Victor Frankenstein's misfortunes, starting off with the creation of the monster and gradually advancing towards his relentless pursuit of the creature among the northern glaciers. And at the heart of this second narrative lies a third, more visceral and shocking story: the autobiographical account of the creature himself, the true heart of the novel, its line of flight, the exact moment when the monster pleads for access to discourse.

I may willfully run the risk of making a generalizing assumption here: it could be that everything else in *Frankenstein* is a sheer pretext for this crucial core. The Gothic monster, the abject being, the constitutive outside, the unnamed - thereafter non-existent - creature demands that its life history be heard! In what other work of the Gothic tradition, before or after Mary Shelley's, was such subversion even glimpsed at? It is an extremely courageous and challenging move that which entitles the Gothic monster to speak on his own behalf, a gesture that tends to the implosion of the all systems, a maximum inscription of the difference in the order of discourse. I am not surprised, then, that the monster's account should have to be framed by a shriek of other voices that ultimately intend to smother it.

This gesture of insubordination will turn out of control in postmodernity, where the resistance to subalternity has become more extreme. Not by chance, Atwood

chooses to place the focus of "*Lusus naturae*" on the deepest set of the novel's chapters. We all know but too well the misfortunes narrated by the creature of *Frankenstein*, who, given up by his own father, grows up alone in the woods while secretly observing a family of exiles from whom he learns the nature of human bonds. Self-taught, he learns to read and speak in search of the protection of his neighbors, who violently turn their backs on him, thus making him a violent wicked criminal who plots revenge against his progenitor. But unlike Mary Shelley's novel, in which the monster's voice is heard indirectly and tortuously, Margaret Atwood's tale rules out any frame narratives. Here we only ever read the monster's account of its self-knowledge process which undoubtedly thinks back to that of the creature of *Frankenstein*, encompassing the vision of its own image, the education through literature, an understanding of its terrifying potential, but also of the communal nature of human bonds, the need of building similar bonds, and the perception of its own sexuality.

Lusus naturae: a freak of nature. A monster. The nameless female protagonist in Atwood's tale is thus defined by the doctor summoned from distant lands - the family doctor himself, she tells us, would have spread unwanted rumors. Her appearance is aberrant, and very much resembles the mythological hybrids, a blend of animal and human: "my yellow eyes, my pink teeth, my red fingernails, the long dark hair that was sprouting on my chest and arms" (ATWOOD, 2014, p. 110). A character who, in its looks and proportions, defies aesthetic conventions of beauty which make her an object of scientific scrutiny, an institutionalized way of exercising control and power over bodies. The illness that affects her, however, is never clear to either the reader or the family. She claims to be affected by breakdowns and endless hours of pain, though it is implied that she might experience episodes of lucidity, during which she takes her place at the table with the other members of her family, "entering into the conversation as best I could while searching out the chunks of potato in my bowl" (ATWOOD, 2014, p. 109), alternating with episodes of apparent delirium, in which "I'd be off in the darkest corner, mewing to myself and listening to the twittering voices nobody else could hear" (ATWOOD, 2014, p. 109).

Despite hinting at schizophrenia and zoanthropy, which emerge as manifestations of insanity that invalidate her monstrous discourse, the imprecise nature of her illness causes the family to come up with alternative hypotheses - it might be a curse, a divine punishment, or even demonic possession - so they end up resorting to obscurantist methods of healing: her grandmother, for one, spreads garlic cloves along the girl's doorway, and on a certain occasion, "she'd held my head under the water in which the dirty clothes were soaking, praying while she did. That was to eject the demon she was convinced had flown in through my mouth and was lodged near my breastbone" (ATWOOD, 2014, p. 110). The garlic over the doorway, the fact that the creature seems to suffer from photosensitivity, the veiled zoomorphism,

and the medical diagnosis that she would crave blood, all add up to suggest that the girl might be a vampire, another monstrous figure epitomized in the Gothic tradition. Nevertheless, the ambiguity and doubt never fall apart. This is the *lusus naturae*: a midterm that creates confusion and defies both superstition and science.

There is a quite interesting study by Paula Findlen (1990) on the *lusus naturae* and its relationship with the sciences, the arts and philosophy. The term, she explains, comes from the Latin, where *lusus* meant "joke", "game", or "sport". A *lusus naturae* was a joke of nature, one that would fulfill an important role in the field of the developing natural sciences in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, influenced by Greco-Roman philosophical treatises, especially those of Aristotle and Pliny, as well as the literary bestiaries engendered in the fables of Ovid. For these sciences, the idea of gaming not only signaled the existence of an independent and volitional nature, which purposefully created aberrations to confuse man, but it also acted as a scientific procedure of categorization of unexplainable natural phenomena such as geometric forms inscribed in rocks, fossils, individuals of gigantic or tiny proportions, zoophytes, fractals, shells, and unicorn horns.

Findlen (1990, p. 293) states that "lusus was frequently used as an anti-definition - a means of explaining something that would otherwise have been without explanation". This is the very axiom of monstrosity: Margaret Atwood's *lusus naturae* is, in fact, an anti-category that blows up innumerable classification systems. As such, her surrounding fellows feel that something must be done to stop it. The creature asks herself, "What could be done with me, what should be done with me? Both were the same question. The possibilities were limited" (ATWOOD, 2014, p. 109). They were limited indeed, but to the imperative of abjection. Whatever fate should befall the monster, it was necessary to keep her a secret, to remove her from the community at large, to isolate her so she would not corrupt the purity of the remaining relatives, since "[o]ur family had always been respected, and even liked, more or less. It still was. It still would be, if something could be done about me. Before I leaked out, so to say" (ATWOOD, 2014, p. 110).

The ultimate attempt at her abjection occurs when the family decides for her death: "It was decided that I should die. That way I would not stand in the way of my sister, I would not loom over her like a fate" (ATWOOD, 2014, p. 111). Her death is staged for the whole neighborhood so that her family could be free from the burden of responding publicly for her monstrosity. The priest is bribed into presiding over the funeral, during which the grandmother cooks, the father wears the black suit only worn at special occasions, the neighbors whisper in awe and everyone cries as if the unwanted creature had indeed passed away. The coffin is finally filled with damp straw and buried. Three months later, her sister gets married.

On the occasion of her feigned demise, the girl is described in stereotypes that reinforce a certain conception of female innocence and virginity, highly ironic

insofar as the postmodern monster problematizes these conventions. The priest tells her that "God had chosen me as a special girl, a sort of bride, you might say" (ATWOOD, 2014, p 112) and that "I was lucky, because I would stay innocent all my life, no man would want to pollute me, and then I would go straight to Heaven" (ATWOOD, 2014, p. 112). These are very ironic remarks, considering that, according to Julia Kristeva (1982, p. 03-04), the abject generally represents pollution, defilement, and the very possibility of death, or rather anything else that might disturb the system. Besides, in order to validate the narrative of her death, the *lusus naturae* is shown on a coffin "in a white dress with a lot of white veiling over me, fitting for a virgin and useful in concealing my whiskers" (ATWOOD, 2014, p. 112). The image of the hairy monster covered by a virgin veil is quite comic indeed, but it bears a lot of criticism as well, for the merging of two apparently incongruous images reveals how problematic the performative construction of femininity is, being one that requires rituals of purity and chastity even where they are most improbable to take place. The monster signals a surreptitious refusal of these defining imperatives of a conventional gender identity, for the mere recognition of such an identity would require an understanding of her own sexuality, and therefore the corruption of the immaculate purity that is expected of her.

The girl's death is a violent attempt at the nullification of her right to an identity. Paradoxically, the staged funeral allows her greater freedom, as she conquers spaces that were previously forbidden to her: "At night I had the run of the house, and then the run of the yard, and after that the run of the forest. I no longer had to worry about getting in the way of other people and their futures" (ATWOOD, 2014, p. 113). Her growing jurisdiction over several spaces comes along with a greater understanding of her own self, mediated by strategies of self-knowledge. At this point, just as in *Frankenstein*, literature plays an important role, by offering parameters for the understanding of human feelings and needs. Having learned from her father the ability to read, she tells us: "In the dimness I read Pushkin, and Lord Byron, and the poetry of John Keats. I learned about blighted love, and defiance, and the sweetness of death. I found these thoughts comforting" (ATWOOD, 2014, p. 113).

It is possible to see that the reading options available to her, almost entirely founded upon the Romantic tradition, in which great importance was placed on individuality, highlights the *lusus naturae*'s search for identification, as she becomes an isolated creature while her family members either die or abandon her. From that moment on, she learns that she can perform her monstrous identity by acting upon others to terrify them. Assuming her monstrosity ensures that she takes over an increasingly larger dominion: first the garden, then the forest, and finally her house, which comes to be feared as haunted. On that account, the creature manages to maintain her power over the spaces she conquers:

> I began to explore the limits of my power. I found I had a great deal more of it when unseen than when seen, and most of all when partly seen. I frightened two children in the woods, on purpose: I showed them my pink teeth, my hairy face, my red fingernails, I mewed at them, and they ran away screaming. Soon people avoided our end of the forest. I peered into a window at night and caused hysterics in a young woman: "A thing! I saw a thing!" she sobbed. I was a thing, then. I considered this: in what way is a thing not a person? [...]

> Once the new people had moved in, it was no trouble to get rid of them. I knew the house better than they did, its entrances, its exits. I could make my way around it in the dark. I became an apparition, then another one; I was a red-nailed hand touching a face in the moonlight; I was the sound of a rusted hinge that I made despite myself. They took to their heels, and branded our place as haunted. Then I had it to myself. (ATWOOD, 2014, p. 113-114).

In the manner of the creature of *Frankenstein*, the recognition of a phantasmagoric potential endows the *lusus naturae* with power. Her empowerment is also anchored on a growing perception of monstrosity as a substance that founds a complex and multiple identity, which is both "person", "thing", and "apparition", without ever being defined by any of them. Such acts of self-perception are intricate and presuppose acceptances and denials, which are made clear in the always defining episode in which the creature contemplates its reflection in the mirror: "Inside our house, I tried a mirror. They say dead people can't see their own reflections, and it was true; I could not see myself. I saw something, but that something was not myself: it looked nothing like the kind and pretty girl I knew myself to be, at heart" (ATWOOD, 2014, p. 114).

The tension between seeing and not seeing, which essentially embodies the ambiguity between being and not being, never finds resolution, which makes the monster an emblem of the fragmented postmodern identities. At some point, the assumption of such an identity should have to acknowledge the most elementary impulses of the libido, and just as the monster of Mary Shelley calls for a wife, that of Margaret Atwood would have to experience sexual desire. By watching a secretive sexual relationship in the woods, an indecipherable act for her naive and innocent self, the girl, who for so long had resigned to a lonesome existence, projects onto the event both her physical desire and the need for identification that bonds human beings together:

> They clutched each other, they twined together, they fell to the ground. Mewing noises came from them, growls, little screams. Perhaps they were having fits, both of them at once. Perhaps they were - oh, at last! - beings like myself. They did not look like me. [...] They must be in the preliminary stages, I thought. They

know they are changing, they have sought out each other for the company and
to share their fits. [...] What a consolation it would be to me if I, too, could join
in! (ATWOOD, 2014, p. 115).

Here lies a curious view on the communities living in a constant state of
discontent vis-a-vis the repression of sexuality: the monster becomes a metaphor
for unbounded sexual desire, lurking in the shadows, and threatening to disintegrate
the social organization founded on the sublimation of the libido. The *lusus naturae*
is sexuality itself, a monster upon which infinite identity and gender discourses
are produced in an attempt at regulating which practices are to be considered
healthy and adequate, and which ones should be rejected. By venturing to join the
loving couple in their communal "fits", the monster also turns into a metaphor for
deviant sexuality, manifested in an inappropriate and bestial sexual act, one that
involuntarily awakens fear and repulsion. The denial of affectivity reinforces her
displaced and abject condition, but it also awakens fears that lead the villagers to
dig up her coffin and see it empty, thus imagining the worst. They now believe
that she might be a supernatural being returned from the dead, a witch or vampire
who needs to be sacrificed so that the community can recover its balance. They
then head towards her house carrying torches and sticks, intending to reenact her
abjection once and for all by burning her at the stake.

As the mob advances and prepares to lynch her, the girl's efforts to define
herself as an entity worthy of an identity become more extreme. "What can I say
to them, how can I explain myself?" (ATWOOD, 2014, p. 116), she asks herself.
"'I am a human being", I could say. But what proof do I have of that? 'I am a *lusus
naturae*! Take me to the city! I should be studied!'" (ATWOOD, 2014, p. 116).
Neither monster nor human, the postmodern *lusus naturae* remains indecipherable,
and the fear of indecipherability forces her exclusion. Still, she predicts: "After a
while I'll become an upside-down saint; my finger bones will be sold as dark relics.
I'll be a legend, by then" (ATWOOD, 2014, p. 116).

It is impossible to make away with someone who will most certainly survive as
a legend. Cohen (1996, p. 4) correctly states that the monster always escapes. There
is no stopping it: it will eventually find a way to return. Kill it, and it will come back
from the dead to haunt those who have survived. Deny it the right to an identity, and
it will hinder its own abjection, by breaking boundaries and questioning paradigms.
Silence its voice, and it will make itself heard from the depths of difference. Ignore
its existence, and it will most insidiously exercise its power.

Which leads us back to my opening question: what could be left of the Gothic
monster in the postmodern text? First of all, it has grown to signify a more radical
plea for voice: we can now hear the monster's voice in itself, free from the many
framing devices that hover over it in the narrative of *Frankenstein*. It has also broken
new ground into gaining access to the order of discourse, coming to represent a

more furious questioning of abjection, since its political workings are now revealed in the performative structuring and validation of gender and identity. On top of that, the monster has become an epitome of the postmodern identity paradigm, assuming in-betweenness and fluidity as its nature, leaving behind the need for a solid and unchangeable subjectivity, and taking up abjection as the space from where it can best exercise its subversive power. And finally, it has displayed the parodic force of the postmodern Gothic. Indeed, Margaret Atwood's metafictional tale works as a deconstructive retelling of the silencing of Frankenstein's creature, and does so as a notorious attestation that, in effect, the monster will also escape from the pages of tradition to lodge, imperishable, in those of the postmodern Gothic.

COPATI, G. A voz do monstro. **Itinerários**, Araraquara, n. 47, p. 39-51, jul./dez. 2018.

- ■ *RESUMO: Considerações sobre a figura do monstro gótico como metáfora das identidades pós-modernas, seguidas da leitura do conto "Lusus naturae", de Margaret Atwood, a partir de ecos de* Frankenstein*, de Mary Shelley, como problematização dessa hipótese.*

- ■ *PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Abjeção.* Frankenstein*. Identidades pós-modernas. Margaret Atwood. Monstro gótico.*

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