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NEGATION IN MARY SHELLEY'S JOURNALS: A MORPHOSYNTACTIC OPERATION OR CONCEPT OF LIFE

According to Stuart Curran “ages are marked by literary fashion as much as by their political settlements or upheavals” [Curran 1996: 216]. The same can be said about a great number of writers whose personal views and experience defined their writing in each and every aspect – starting from the plot, choice of characters, historical background, political position and finishing with personalised “discourse” touch and intertextual figures, for instance, autobiographical allusions and reminiscences. But then there is such a category as women’s writing, which one way or another inevitably gives rise to endless debates and arguments with regard to its value and worthiness. In this respect, however, Mary Shelley is considered by many to be one and only female writer who managed to take over the world of British Romanticism with just one work:

Frankenstein has so overshadowed Mary Shelley’s other books in the popular imagination that many readers believe – erroneously – that she is a one-book author [Hoeverler 2003: 45].

With regard to “Frankenstein” Ann K. Mellor indeed speaks of it very highly:

Mary Shelley’s waking nightmare on June 16, 1816, inspired one of the most powerful horror stories of Western civilization. It can claim the status of a myth, so profoundly resonant in its implications for our comprehension of our selves and our place in the world that it has become, at least in its barest outline, a trope of everyday life. [...] So deeply does it probe the collective cultural psyche of the modern era that it deserves to be called a myth, on a par with the most telling stories of Greek and Norse gods and goddesses [Mellor 1988: 38].

On the other hand, notwithstanding deep resonance of “Frankenstein”, Mary Shelley as well as her works was still unanimously rejected or/and underestimated by her “superior” male counterparts. So, what is it

then and who is it that limited Mary Shelley to being socially and intellectually “inferior”?

First and foremost, British Romanticism is arguably perceived as solely male turf absolutely obsessed with poetry and unlike its predecessors thinking very low of any literary achievements in prose. Together with Stuart Curran we cannot help but wonder:

What is it, then, that makes us commonly associate British Romanticism with poetry? Why, indeed, until recently did we generally separate the writers of prose – except for literary theorists like Coleridge and Hazlitt – from the poets, pretending, for instance, that Jane Austen inhabited a world fundamentally different from that of Shelley rather than living at the same time and, indeed about twenty-five miles from his birthplace, and writing constantly about families that easily could pass for Shelley’s own? [Curran 1996: 216].

And he even wonders more while emphasizing the fact that “all the major poets (and a multitude of minor ones too) planned and, except for Coleridge, executed epic poems” [Curran 1996: 216]. Looking for the clues though Stuart Curran does list a few key factors. The first one as he claims is that “the fittest way to survive the longest war in modern history was to retreat into a mental sanctuary [...]” [Curran 1996: 218].

Of course, since a writer is supposed to be first and foremost a conscientious citizen, poetry has always made a difference regardless of the epoch, age, confrontation or regime, for that matter. Romanticists are not an exception and to prove that Stuart Curran mentions Shelley’s “Mask of Anarchy” and honoured deeds of Leigh Hunt and his brother, which later they paid for, as well as Byron’s satire on George III and Robert Southey “The Vision of Judgment”, and, finally, the very fact that George Canning, a leader of the Tory House of Commons and foreign secretary of the government, published his collected poems.

Mentioning Keats as an outcast for the English poets because of his lack of class and education, Stuart Curran asserts that status did matter. But and it is no surprise that gender restrictions and biased attitudes were by all means the strongest. This is how women writers were limited to one genre only:

As long as fiction could be conceived to be a woman’s genre, it could be attacked as morally pernicious, anti-intellectual, an affront to civilized values, and therefore subversive of the state [Curran 1996: 220].

And as we can see later with a recognized genius of Jane Austen and Walter Scott, still it was “a tacit agreement” among the English Poets under any circumstances not to take up prose.

It is no wonder that Mary Shelley, young, confident, well-educated and incredibly talented prose writer was excluded as “the *déclassé*” and “the marginalized” because poetry did matter and “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world”¹. Given both active and passive repression Mary Shelley had no choice but

¹ <https://www.saylor.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/A-Defense-of-Poetry.pdf>

to turn to prose. Or probably she was so much opposed to soft, emotional, lyrical world of Romantic poets and poetry that she purposefully and deliberately picked a path where every work is a protest against conformities, standards and norms set by “the English Poets”, against everything honoured and sung and so much admired, and where she numerously criticises Romantic egotism and Romantic desire as well as transcendental Romantic imagination and where she condemns Romantic aggression and violence. It cannot be overemphasized then how significant her heritage has become in the light of more profound and absolutely different approach not only to Romantic poetry, but to Romantic discourse of Mary Shelley per se.

Groundbreaking and thorough work was firstly done by Belly T. Bennet. As a result three volumes of Mary Shelley’s letters were finally published opening the door for so called “Mary Shelley’s context”. Then there were Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert who edited “The Journals of Mary Shelley” (1987) and thereby giving more food for thought. And certainly there is an honored biography “Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality” (1989) by Emily Sunstein. Since the publications like these Mary Shelley’s status in Romantic literature has been numerously and completely re-assessed and read anew. Mary Poovey, for instance, in “The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen” (1984) goes through works of Mary Shelley and reconsiders them in the light of conventional cultural heritage i.e. “the proper lady concept”. Anne K. Mellor in “Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters” (1988) claims that Mary Shelly was personally divided between Romantic ideology and the way she felt, and that the latter caused a huge contradiction, a conflict between an ethic of care and an ethic of control, impartial treatment as well as equal rights and responsibilities for representatives of both genders and on the other hand justice grounded on the [masculine] authority of the elders. Deep original look into the world of psychology of M. Shelley’s characters is presented by William D. Brewer in the book “The Mental Anatomies of William Godwin and Mary Shelley” (2001). “The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley” (2003) compiles works of renowned scholars such as Anne K. Mellor, Pamela Clemit, Esther Schor, Stuart Curran, to name but a few, based on different approaches and read in various contexts, namely, aesthetic culture, literary culture, literary history, etc. Mary Shelly is also called a femme fatale by Adriana Craciun in the book “Fatal Women of Romanticism” (2003) where she exposes and dwells upon sexual difference and its role in the establishment of feminism and gendered writing. “A Life with Mary Shelly” (2014) by Barbara Johnson, a destructive and psychoanalytic literary theorist, is a tremendous outcome of Johnson’s research on Mary Shelley and her works done throughout her life and concentrated on the relation between Mary Shelley’s life and writing. These are just very few works that elaborate on Mary Shelley’s life, and work, and ideology, but they offer some really interesting, insightful observations, based not only on Mary Shelley’s writings but

on her journal as well. For example, it is worth mentioning here that regardless of a great number of works, "Frankenstein" being notably the most recognized and celebrated of all, where Mary Shelley criticises the Romantic Ideal of "the English Poets", especially the Shelleyan one, she still makes a confession in her journal:

I was nursed and fed with a love of glory. To be something great and good was the precept given me by my Father: Shelley reiterated it. Alone and poor, I could only be something by joining a party; and there was much in me — the woman's love of looking up, and being guided, and being willing to do any- thing if any one supported and brought me forward — which would have made me a good partisan. But Shelley died, and I was alone. My Father, from age and domestic circumstances, could not "me faire valoir!" My total friendlessness, my horror of pushing, and inability to put myself forward unless led, cherished and supported, — all this has sunk me in a state of loneliness no other human being ever before, I believe, endured — except Robinson Crusoe. How many tears and spasms of anguish this solitude has cost me, lies buried in my memory" [Shelley 1947: 205].

And because of that quotation and many more other "overtures" to the conventional "self" M. Poovey speaks of Mary Shelley's character as "a remarkable combination of stereotypical feminine reticence and unconventional self-assertion" [Poovey 1984: 115] who would gladly "conform to the conventional model of feminine propriety" [Poovey 1984: 116] and at the same time would "prove herself by means of her pen and her imagination" [Poovey 1984: 115]. For instance, Mary Shelley says:

In the first place, with regard to "the good cause" — the cause of the advancement of freedom and knowledge, of the rights of women, etc. — I am not a person of opinions. I have said elsewhere that human beings differ greatly in this. Some have a passion for reforming the world; others do not cling to particular opinions. That my parents and Shelley were of the former class, make me respect it. I respect such when joined to real disinterestedness, toleration, and a clear understanding. [...] For myself, I earnestly desire the good and enlightenment of my fellow-creatures, and see all, in the present course, tending to the same, and rejoice; but I am not for violent extremes, which only bring on an injurious reaction [Shelley 1947: 204].

And then we could not help but notice that in doing so Mary Shelley seems to be so much in denial and so highly prone to use the negation that it has drawn our attention to her thoughts again. Let's take a look at one short passage from her journal.

Sunday, Oct. 21.^ — I have been so often abused by pretended friends for my lukewarmness in "the good cause," that, though I disdain to answer them, I shall put down here a few thoughts on this subject. I am much of a self-examiner. Vanity is not my fault, I think; if it is, it is uncomfortable vanity, for I have none that teaches me to be satisfied with myself; far otherwise, — and, if I use the word disdain, it is that I think my qualities (such as they are) not appreciated from unworthy causes. In the first place, with regard to "the good cause" — the cause of the advancement of freedom and knowledge, of the rights of women, etc. — I am not a person of opinions. I have said elsewhere that human beings differ greatly in this. Some have

a passion for reforming the world; others do not cling to particular opinions. That my parents and Shelley were of the former class, makes me respect it. I respect such when joined to real disinterestedness, toleration, and a clear understanding. My accusers, after such as these, appear to me mere drivellers. For myself, I earnestly desire the good and enlightenment of my fellow-creatures, and see all, in the present course, tending to the same, and rejoice; but I am not for violent extremes, which only bring on an injurious reaction. I have never written a word in disfavour of liberalism; that I have not supported it openly in writing, arises from the following causes, as far as I know: —

That I have not argumentative powers: I see things pretty clearly, but cannot demonstrate them. Besides, I feel the counter-arguments too strongly. I do not feel that I could say aught to support the cause efficiently; besides that, on some topics (especially with regard to my own sex), I am far from making up my mind. I believe we are sent here to educate ourselves, and that self-denial, and disappointment, and self-control, are a part of our education; that it is not by taking away all restraining law that our improvement is to be achieved; and, though many things need great amendment, I can by no means go so far as my friends would have me. When I feel that I can say what will benefit my fellow-creatures, I will speak: not before. [...] Then, I recoil from the vulgar abuse of the inimical press. I do more than recoil: proud and sensitive, I act on the defensive — an inglorious position.

To hang back, as I do, brings a penalty. I was nursed and fed with a love of glory. To be something great and good was the precept given me by my Father: Shelley reiterated it. Alone and poor, I could only be something by joining a party; and there was much in me — the woman's love of looking up, and being guided, and being willing to do anything if any one supported and brought me forward — which would have made me a good partisan. But Shelley died, and I was alone. My Father, from age and domestic circumstances, could not "me faire valoir!" My total friendlessness, my horror of pushing, and inability to put myself forward unless led, cherished and supported, — all this has sunk me in a state of loneliness no other human being ever before, I believe, endured — except Robinson Crusoe. How many tears and spasms of anguish this solitude has cost me, lies buried in my memory.

If I had raved and ranted about what I did not understand; had I adopted a set of opinions, and propagated them with enthusiasm; had I been careless of attack, and eager for notoriety; then the party to which I belonged had gathered round me, and I had not been alone. But since I had lost Shelley I have no wish to ally myself to the Radicals — they are full of repulsion to me — violent without any sense of Justice — selfish in the extreme — talking without knowledge — rude, envious and insolent — I wish to have nothing to do with them.

It has been the fashion with these same friends to accuse me of worldliness. There, indeed, in my own heart and conscience, I take a high ground. I may distrust

my own judgment too much — be too indolent and too timid; but in conduct I am above merited blame.

I like society; I believe all persons who have any talent (who are in good health) do. The soil that gives forth nothing, may lie ever fallow; but that which produces — however humble its product— needs cultivation, change of harvest, refreshing dews, and ripening sun. Books do much; but the living intercourse is the vital heat. Debarred from that, how have I pined and died! My early friends chose the position of enemies. When I first discovered that a trusted friend had acted falsely by me, I was nearly destroyed.** My health was shaken. I remembered thinking, with a burst of agonizing tears, that I should prefer a bed of torture to the unutterable anguish a friend's falsehood engendered. There is no resentment; but the world can never be to me what it was before. Trust, and confidence, and the heart's sincere devotion, are gone.

I sought at that time to make acquaintances — to divert my mind from this anguish. I got entangled in various ways through my ready sympathy and too eager heart; but I never crouched to society — never sought it unworthily. If I have never written to vindicate the rights of women, I have ever befriended women when oppressed. At every risk I have befriended and supported victims to the social system; but I make no boast, for in truth it is simple justice I perform; and so I am still reviled for being worldly [Shelley 1947: 204-206].

Going through a few paragraphs from Mary Shelley's journal we have noticed four distinctive characteristics of Mary Shelley's so called "denial". The first and the major one is emphasis on vocabulary with **negative meaning/connotation**. While Mary Shelley is talking about her values and preferences, explaining her reasons, sharing her experience, in a passage of 968 words she uses 55 words with negative meaning/connotation. Here they are:

abused, pretended, disdain, toleration, accusers, drivellers, violent extremes, injurious, self-denial, disappointment, self-control, restrain, recoil, vulgar abuse, inimical, penalty, poor, horror, pushing, sunk, loneliness, endured, tears, spasms, anguish, solitude, rave, rant, attack, notoriety, lost, repulsion, selfish, rude, envious, insolent, accuse, indolent, timid, blame, fallow, debarred, pined, died, enemies, falsely, destroyed, agonizing, falsehood, resentment, entangled, oppressed, reviled.

The second major group we would call "**no/not/never category**" with as many as nineteen phrases, namely:

vanity is not my fault; not appreciated; I am not a person of opinions,; do not cling; I am not for; I have never written; I have not supported, I have not argumentative powers, I cannot demonstrate; I do not feel; by no means; not before; my father could not "me faire valoir"; no other human being; I did not understand; I had not been alone; I have no wish; there's no resentment; I make no boast.

The third group would be "**negative phrases category**":

far otherwise; I am far from making up my mind; taking away, act on the defensive; I could only be something by joining a party; unless led; buried in my memory; in the extreme; have nothing to do with; soil that gives nothing; a bed of torture.

To the fourth group belongs **“negative prefixes/suffixes category”**:

uncomfortable, unworthy, disinterestedness, disfavor, inglorious, friendlessness, inability, careless, distrust, unutterable, unworthily.

Although in the last paragraph we can see how different and positive Mary Shelley finally starts to feel:

God grant a happier and a better day is near! Percy — my all-in-all — will, I trust, by his excellent understanding, his clear, bright, sincere spirit and affectionate heart, repay me for sad long years of desolation. His career may lead me into the thick of life or only gild a quiet home. I am content with either, and, as I grow older I grow more fearless for myself — I become firmer in my opinions. The experienced, the suffering, the thoughtful may at last speak unrebuked. If it be the will of God that I live, I may ally my name yet to “the good cause,” though I do not expect to please my accusers [Shelley 1947: 206].

And still there is no certainty on Mary Shelley’s part whatsoever:

Thus have I put down my thoughts. I may have deceived myself; I may be in the wrong; I try to examine myself; and such as I have written appears to me the exact truth [Shelley 1947: 206].

Dictionary of Psychology² defines denial as a psychological process in which an individual refuses to accept an aspect of reality despite robust evidence of this. Since there is so much of it, in figures that would come to as much as a quarter (calculations based on the above passage from Mary Shelley’s journal), we cannot help but wonder what that contradiction is really about, and why she is so much in denial, and along with her “self” who else she is trying to persuade more, herself, or her loyal feminine audience who still expected far more from the person they looked up to. Or probably she was saying so just to live up to the expectations of those who stood up for conventional roles in society and wouldn’t have it another way. Or she was just not ready to fight the fight since she did not feel up to it. Or... There are many “ors” in here especially when we take into consideration a remarkable study by Paul A. Cantor “Mary Shelley and the Taming of the Byronic Hero: “Transformation” and “The Deformed Transformed”. While so many authors still hold to “Frankenstein” as the one and only work which, powerful as it is, best of all illustrates Mary Shelley’s attitude to Romantic ideal, Paul A. Cantor draws our attention to another piece of writing which is not less relevant in here. It all started when in 1822-23 Mary Shelley agreed to help Byron with his “The Deformed Transformed”. And then in 1830 she published her own story called “Transformation”. Paul A. Cantor suggests viewing it as a feminist revision of “The Deformed Transformed” and considering it “as a significant episode in the history of English Romanticism” [Cantor 1993: 90], the one where Mary Shelley’s words from her journal “*I am not for violent extremes*” speak to the reader through both “Frankenstein” and “Transformation” and where she looks into the true colours of

² <http://www.oxfordreference.com>

Romanticism and what this “peaceful” male-dominated movement is really about. And this is where Paul A. Cantor draws our attention to Byron and his “Oriental Tales”, poems where most of all the reader is “struck by the disproportion of the violence they portray”, “[...] a pattern in which the aggressive elements tend to predominate” [Cantor 1993: 91]. Moreover, love is always pushed to the margins and hate is celebrated over and over again, regardless, which is remarkable, of gender, and the place, and the motives, and the age. It is like Romanticism is all about hate. And this is when another negative statement from Mary Shelley’s journal comes to mind: “*I am far from making up my mind*”. Because how could she if this is not the way she expected things to turn out. And this is definitely not the Romanticism she would agree to celebrate. But then Paul A. Cantor interweaves Rene Girard’s theory of mimetic desire and mimetic violence in his study and explains “violence patterns” in Byron’s poetry as:

[...] the hidden agenda of the Byronic hero. At first sight the characters in the poetic tales seem to stumble into criminality. Because their desires are for one reason or another illicit, they end up at odds with society. But a Girardian reading suggests that something deep within these characters makes them antisocial to begin with, and the desires that ostensibly ruin their lives paradoxically serve the function of bringing about the break with society they secretly crave. Along with such writers as Kleist and Dostoevsky, Byron must be credited with discovering what might be called the metaphysics of criminality as a theme for literature [Cantor 1993: 93].

Hence, the main idea is the following:

Byron’s characters are not antisocial because their desires are criminal; they generate criminal desires because they are by nature antisocial [Cantor 1993: 93].

Mimetic/Girardian reading works for “Frankenstein” as well and it is absolutely applicable to Mary Shelley’s “hidden agenda” and her way of saying “*I am not a person of opinions*”. Thus, she is not anti-Romantic because her desires are peaceful; she generates peaceful desires because she is by nature anti-Romantic, that is anti everything traditional male Romanticism preaches. And that’s why she finally says, “*I can by no means go so far as my friends would have me*”. Being in a sense a perfect embodiment of “the proper woman” and at the same time holding her head up while fighting her own battles, Mary Shelley is not “the glaring contradiction” in British Romanticism. She simply rises above and creates her own manifest which may not be conventional for the age but it is by all means very Mary Shelleyan.

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Summary

Present paper is an interdisciplinary approach to Mary Shelley's works aimed at contributing to Romantic studies of Mary Shelley's discourse by providing some insight into critical readings of Mary Shelley's works by distinguished scholars in Romantic Literature studies and looking into the "negative" nature of Mary Shelley's confessions speaking through her notes, as well as putting into perspective more studies on "the negation/denial" aspect based on Julia Kristeva's intertextuality, Carl Jung's archetypes, Rene Girard's mimetic approach and Sigmund Freud's "desire theory".

³ https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.54863/2015.54863.Mary-Shelleys-Journal1947_djvu.txt