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Technology and moral lapses in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Antonie Plămădeală's *Three Hours in Hell*

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Abstract:
This article analyses Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Antonie Plămădeală's *Three Hours in Hell*, with the aim of identifying moral transgressions against the human condition when technology becomes a tool of dehumanization. Such dehumanization is manifested through the oppression, humiliation, and manipulation of the individual, including the denial of the right to familial, national, or cultural belonging. In *Frankenstein*, driven by the temptation to experiment with the emerging technologies of his time, Dr. Frankenstein creates a man in an imitation of a divine act, yet without a sense of responsibility, love, or empathy toward his creation. Departing from the demiurgic ideal, the experimenter succeeds in bringing a living body into existence through technological means but fails to grant it individuality shaped by family bonds, the shelter of a home, a homeland, or the formative influence of emotional experience. This absence culminates in a profound spiritual collapse. Similarly, in *Three Hours in Hell*, technology is deployed to inflict physical mutilation, severing the mind from the body, the individual from the family, and the social self from the inner self. Through this process, the novel depicts the ideological manipulation of the individual, the society, and the world at large.

Keywords:
Technology, Experiment, Individual, Dehumanisation, Ideological manipulation.

Broadly speaking, the overarching objective of techno-scientific projects is to enhance the quality of human life, to foster interpersonal closeness and socialisation, emphasising one's freedom of expression. However, when these principles are neglected, there is a risk – though not an inevitability – that human being may experience a loss of identity, individuality, and connection to emotional life, which can lead to a diminished sense of belonging in the world. In this light, technological experimentation driven primarily by personal ambition and conducted without careful ethical consideration may compromise not only the nature of the creation but also the humanity of its creator. Literature thus illustrates cases in which, thanks to technological and scientific breakthroughs, humankind displays its capacity for influence, violence and the oppressive potential to ruin. The experimenter employs an obtuse, narcissistic, and rigid approach, devoid of empathy, in order to violate the moral and religious laws pertaining to the other – the so-called object of

experimentation – in order to master their mind, body and soul. That is why philosopher James Hughes, one of the main instigators of «democratic» transhumanism, ably summed up the principle: «It may be that developing our capacity for empathy is the key to surviving the myriad threats of the 21st century, from war to climate change» (Le Dévédec, 2019: 85). As such, «if human beings do not better adapt psychologically and morally to these new conditions, human civilization could be threatened» (Persson, Savulescu, 2010: 660). Thus, the objective of this study is to analyse how a technological invention can have disastrous consequences for humankind when the experimenter's intention is ethically irresponsible. The present paper examines the theme of dehumanization in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Antonie Plămădeală's *Three Hours in Hell* (*Trei ceasuri în iad*), works that portray characters who, as a consequence of their relationship with a creator or dictator, experience a loss of identity, individuality, memories, relationships, kinship, and companionship.

This issue of dehumanization finds a remarkable expression in *Frankenstein*, whose conception is closely linked to her personal experiences. As critics have noted, Mary Shelley's difficult personal experiences — marked by loss, rejection, and emotional isolation—are often regarded as having played a crucial role in shaping the figure of the monster in Frankenstein. Campbell Ashby's study, *Personal Problems = Great Literature: Shelley's Motherhood Issues Reflected In Frankenstein*, argues that the novel functions as an artistic representation of the inner, psychological drama of the young girl deprived of parental love, as well as Percy's emotional breakdown, indifference and moral irresponsibility towards his child:

> In her novel, *Frankenstein*, which she wrote while experiencing the aftermath of this harsh reality, Victor Frankenstein creates a monster, going against the natural cycle of life, which turns into a true monster after receiving no love from his own father. The connection typically made from experiencing childbirth is absent, and that is what creates their horrifying relationship. (...) In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley creates a failing father and son relationship between Victor and the monster in order to express her depression in real life. Mary Shelley essentially writes herself into the novel as Frankenstein, with each encounter in each of their lives eerily similar to each other's. They create a monster to perhaps settle the need for a child for Shelley, and the need for a child of science for Frankenstein. (Ashby, 2019: 61-62)

Overwhelmed by this profound ontological crisis and impressed by the latest scientific discoveries (the miracle of electricity, which had been inadequately explained in 18th-century studies), Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, at the suggestion of Lord Byron, who was residing at the Villa Diodiati on Lake Geneva in Switzerland, begins to write the novel *Frankenstein*. At that time, Giovanni Aldini, a professor of physics at the University of Bologna, expanded his experiments from frogs to larger animals and even human limbs. The

most controversial demonstration occurred in London in 1803, when he applied electrical currents to the corpse of the recently executed murderer George Foster. It is assumed that Mary Shelley's motivation in this work was to externalise, through artistic representation, the inner emptiness that was created by the absence of a "nurturing" mother and protective father. Considering that, Quinnlan Burke recognizes the same necessity to "tear oneself out" the complex emotional state of mourning and in Victor Frankenstein's decision, because "his mother's death has had a deep psychological impact on Victor, and that he is obsessing over finding something to replace the feeling of loss. This ultimately results in Victor's creation of the monster" (Burke, 2020).

In Mary Shelley's narrative, Victor Frankenstein is portrayed as a passionate experimenter, eager to test the limits of his scientific capabilities. Motivated by the ambition to create a man in his own image and aided by the most advanced technologies of his time, he assumes the role of an absolute creator. In undertaking this act, he consciously excludes God from the process, thereby committing a deliberate transgression of fundamental laws. This hubristic endeavor recalls the myth of Pandora's box, foreshadowing a succession of moral aberrations that will ultimately affect humanity. As Tsjalling Swierstra wrote:

> However, technological artefacts have become much more ubiquitous since the so-called Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and more particularly since the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. How we relate to the natural world around us, to our fellow human beings, and even to ourselves, all these relations are co-shaped by the dynamics of a rapidly evolving technology. (Swierstra, 2017: 2)

The novel successfully conveys the creator's irresponsible attitude toward his own creation. For Victor Frankenstein, assembling a being from the dismembered parts of various corpses is an act akin to playing God – a temptation to assert power and dominance, rooted in a primordial impulse of the human psyche. Within this framework, technoscience becomes merely a vehicle through which the protagonist channels aggression under the guise of creativity. His focus rests entirely on the act of experimentation, rather than on the fate of the reanimated being. The true moral transgression, therefore, lies not in the creation of this hybrid life form, but in abandoning it to a world destined to meet it with fear, hostility, irritation, and hatred. The creature's aggression, we argue, does not arise from an inherent disposition but from the prolonged isolation and rejection imposed by the human community – conditions that cement its status as a marginalized and undesirable being. In this way, the creator devalues his own work and denies it a rightful place in the world into which he has brought it:

thus, if humanism, in all its varieties, is understood as a view or attitude which assigns to man a central place in reality and at the same time recognizes him as the highest value, then posthumanism includes those concepts which, for various reasons, deny him such high value or undermine his privileged position in reality (...) the sense of going beyond or above the human. (Mazur, 2023: 84)

The technological procedure depicted in Mary Shelley's novel enables Victor Frankenstein to imitate only certain natural functions of the human organism, drawing inspiration from the biblical account of *Genesis* yet falling short of reproducing the divine design and purpose. In the scriptural narrative, God creates man out of love and in harmony with nature, granting him the indivisible unity of body and soul. Human knowledge in this realm, however, remains limited, unable to grasp the full complexity of such creative acts. As a result, the living creation is desacralized from its very inception. Accordingly, the creator–experimenter directs his attention solely to the mechanical functioning of the body, remaining incapable of bestowing a soul, as God did in perfecting His creation: «Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being» (*Genesis* 2:7). It is for this reason that, in *Frankenstein*, the creature ultimately rebels against the experimenter's position, declaring:

> Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature, but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition, for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me. (Shelley, Ebook).

Beyond its hideous body, the creature becomes aware that it lacks the essential components of identity: self-awareness, a sense of belonging, and memory:

> But where were my friends and relations? No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses; or if they had, all my past life was now a blot, a blind vacancy in which I distinguished nothing. From my earliest remembrance I had been as I then was in height and proportion. I had never yet seen a being resembling me or who claimed any intercourse with me. What was I? The question again recurred, to be answered only with groans. (Shelley, Ebook)

Under normal circumstances, these elements facilitate a harmonious interconnection between the "I" and the "self," creating bridges to otherness through intense affective imagery and inner forces that contribute to the consolidation of human identity; they ensure a solid bond between body and psyche. As Thomas Reid observes: «Our own personal identity, and the continued existence of our mind, we know immediately, and not by reasoning. Indeed, it seems to be a part of the testimony of memory. Everything we remember has such a relation to ourselves as

implies necessarily our existence at the time remembered» (Reid 1785: 586). Thus, the refusal to provide the creature with a companion constitutes, in effect, a denial of its right to an identity formed through emotional bonds. Deprived of the possibility of establishing human relationships and of accumulating shared memories, the creature is stripped of the essential means to construct a harmonious inner life – an imaginative sphere capable of sustaining psychological equilibrium. It is from this deprivation that its destructive impulses emerge. As Jean-Jacques Wunenburger states:

> Now, a part of the imaginary includes strong images, with psychic forces, which act on the mind, giving it sensitive, figurative ends, privileged means (over-determined or others reviled or demonized), once freed from their anomie, but inserted into mythical chains, narrative totalities, for which they serve as guiding cores. Between the concrete reality perceived by the senses and the abstract world of reason, there is an intermediate plane, made up of memories, affects, anticipations, simulations and fictions, which occupy a large part of our time, determine our states of mind, orient our thoughts, guide our decisions, influence our behaviour – in short, constitute the substance of our psychic life. (Wunenburger**???**)

The cultivation of affective competencies would significantly contribute to the to the character's personal growth, equipping it to navigate its ontological crisis – a self-acknowledged imperfection. In seeking to construct an authentic identity, the creature implores its creator to fashion a female counterpart, following the Biblical model, so that affective connection might restore the primordial order and the religious experience of humanity. As Elizabeth A. Para notes, the formation of identity is deeply influenced by supportive interpersonal bonds: individuals who benefit from strong family and peer relationships tend to progress toward moratorium and achievement identity statuses (Para, 2008: 105). Within this framework, the creature's request emerges not merely as a plea for companionship, but as an essential step toward psychological balance and self-realization.

> If any being felt emotions of benevolence towards me, I should return them a hundred and a hundredfold; for that one creature's sake I would make peace with the whole kind! But I now indulge in dreams of bliss that cannot be realised. What I ask of you is reasonable and moderate; I demand a creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself; the gratification is small, but it is all that I can receive, and it shall content me. It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another. Our lives will not be happy, but they will be harmless and free from the misery I now feel. Oh! My creator, make me happy; let me feel gratitude towards you for one benefit! Let me see that I excite the sympathy of some existing thing; do not deny me my request. (Shelley, Ebook)

Drawing on her own experiences of emotional betrayal, Mary Shelley transforms her inner turmoil into the symbolic figure of the monster fashioned by Victor Frankenstein. Through an act marked by violence and unrestrained curiosity, he undertakes the creation of a human being, disregarding both the consequences of his experiment and the needs of his creation

– unlike the Demiurge in *Genesis*. The being is subsequently rejected and abhorred by its own "father" (a prototype of the Heavenly Father), who denies it the emotional bonds of attachment and belonging. This refusal constitutes a form of psycho-emotional violence that effectively dehumanizes the creature, shaping it into a malevolent force, a bringer of devastation. In this context, the technology of the era becomes an instrument for amplifying human aggressiveness, restricting the natural development of individuality, and negating the other. The creator-creation relationship thus mirrors the author's own painful experiences of emotional attachment, revealing how the absence of care and empathy can transform unlived love into a destructive power. In this way, the personal and symbolic dimensions of the novel converge with a broader critique of scientific progress stripped of responsibility.

Within the framework of the novel, Dr. Frankenstein's invention stands as a paradigm of a revolutionary shift in scientific endeavour. However, such innovation simultaneously enacts a profound transgression against core ethical principles that sustain human existence. The ontological status of the being thus brought into existence is radically transformed: its identity, individuality, and very essence of being are destabilized, severed from the sphere of affective experience, and deprived of a secure place within the world. In privileging the self-interested aims of technological experimentation over the intrinsic integrity and depth of human nature, the act of creation becomes one devoid of responsibility and bereft of empathy.

In a similar manner, it is relevant to consider another literary work that engages with the intersection of technology and moral transgression: Antonie Plămădeală's *Three Hours in Hell* (1970), written in the context of unprecedented political constraints in communist Romania. Beyond its allegorical dimensions, the novel exposes the underlying mechanisms through which totalitarian regimes erode human dignity and suppress individual freedom. To prevent the exercise of personal autonomy, such regimes cultivate the illusion of possessing complete knowledge of every person and the capacity to exert control over anyone. The narrative depicts the condition of the individual compelled to endure an existence within a consciously constructed "hell," imposed by the totalitarian order. The parable of the "three hours in hell" illustrates processes through which such a regime is established, the methods by which human individuality is systematically eroded, and the ways in which the subject negotiates an artificial reality intrinsically hostile to human life. Dehumanization is enacted through the eradication of all forms of private social expression,

while a pervasive reign of fear emerges as the sole "binding force" within a community stripped of its freedom.

The novel's focus extends beyond a mere recounting of historical events. Rather, the author deliberately moves beyond the boundaries of historicity, shaping the narrative from elements that align more closely with the realm of possibility and the conventions of science fiction. It unfolds in the manner of other major dystopian works, in which the oppressive climate of a totalitarian society is rendered through characteristic dystopian devices, where enforced interconnections and unnatural human reactions are imposed as a utopian ideal of the "good." Within this framework, the state compels Anton Adam to assume the identity of Peter Gast, a decision portrayed as serving both his own interests and those of the community. This imposition follows his participation in a clandestine operation orchestrated by the state – a practice emblematic of the political police in totalitarian regimes. Here, state secrecy is elevated to the status of the supreme good, vigilantly guarded by all characters through the suppression of "responsibility" (in effect, collective fear).

Within such a social system, the life of the individual depends entirely on directives issued from a central authority. This centre is understood to have established its command post in the castle – or rather, in the legend of the castle – that Anton Adam sets out to find. For the history teacher, a devoted admirer of folk traditions, the castle is not a tangible location but a symbolic topos, embodying his fascination with legend. Motivated by this passion, Anton undertakes a journey to the northern regions of the country in search of unusual tales that illuminate distinctive forms of community organisation. The protagonist's evocation of a particular legend – in which an emperor is said to have dictated the rules governing both social and individual life – is far from incidental. The fable that Adam pursues operates as a parabolic framework upon which the entire narrative mechanism is constructed, serving to reflect an underlying reality in the evangelical tradition of moral exempla. The parable of the malevolent ruler thus occupies a central position within the novel's structure. At this stage of analysis, however, it is the image of the castle – present in both the legendary layer of the story and in the narrative reality of the novel – that is of primary significance.

For understandable reasons, although informed that he had undergone a brain replacement (memory graft), Anton Adam – compelled to assume the identity of Peter Gast

– harboured a strong desire to confront the castle doctor who had altered the course of his life, declaring that such actions constituted a crime against humanity:

> I would have liked to tell him that his experiment was a crime against humanity, that I did not consider myself at all happy that he had succeeded with me, that I would fight for a morality of scientific discoveries and their practical applications, that the migration of minds would affect the very substance of humanity, but Murnau did not give me the time. He left, as if he had told me everything and I had no right to any more uncertainties. (Plămădeală, 2010: 289)

The act of intervening in an individual's destiny – particularly with regard to the human form – constitutes a transgression against the natural order. Yet it is the fundamental alteration of what defines human individuality that Antonie Plămădeală seeks to underscore as the true tragedy. The unveiling of the sacred mechanism once intended to govern a world results not in the promised "new world," but in a world turned upside down. This mechanism, characteristic of the two great totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century (Nazism and Communism) proves equally applicable to any form of utopian construct.

Thus, in *Three Hours in Hell*, every mechanism becomes a device for constructing a world of absolute control, sustained by total contempt for the human being. The agents of the system – the secret police – are omnipresent, poised to intervene at the slightest manifestation of individuality or aspiration for freedom: «I can break you apart whenever I want. You're a formula, mister. H_2O, carbon, nitrogen and some other stuff. When it burns, it sizzles. He is human! Who does he think he is?» (Plămădeală, 2010: 302). This disdain is intensified through the systematic stripping away of humanity itself – a process of destruction – while the literal removal of Anton Adam's clothing, exposing his nakedness, serves to remind him of his supposed insignificance by trivialising the human essence within him:

> Isn't it ridiculous to have ideas when you're naked? You're worth nothing. You're nothing as long as you're human. Only the uniform makes anything of you. The uniform gives you the right to speak, because you no longer express yourself, but the nation and its ideals. (Plămădeală, 2010: 303)

An individual's identity must conform entirely to the directives of the state, which have been established as the unquestionable norms of societal coexistence. Once society has been fed the "truth" that a person possesses a specific identity and no other, this "truth" is elevated to the status of an immutable law: «We want you to be Peter Gast, so you are Peter Gast. No one cares what's in your head» (Plămădeală, 2010: 303). In such a framework, the individual's existence becomes subject to the abuses of regulations and constraints that disregard the spiritual essence and intrinsic value of the human being.

It is no coincidence that Antonie Plămădeală's character bears the name Adam, evoking the first man in the Garden of Eden – the primordial "Adam". Within the narrative, Peter Gast is presented not as a disguise concealing Anton Adam, but as the product of an unfortunate accident resulting from inhuman, or even anti-human, experimentation. The layered symbolism of the Adamic figure – embodying the *imago Dei* and the mystery of the human being – converges here in a reductionist construct, one that is embedded in a morbid and terror-filled everyday life shaped by the arbitrary will of the totalitarian system. This systematic obstruction of individuality is deliberately designed to alienate human beings from one another.

The identity of Anton Adam/Peter Gast is an artificial construct imposed by the system, compelling the protagonist to conform to its dictates. Any individual found to have deviated from the prescribed authority is subjected to the severe penalty of purging. The narrative concerning the implanted memory that Anton Adam received – along with the prohibition against disclosing it – eventually proves to be a fabrication. Yet this truth is revealed only to the reader, not to the novel's characters, who remain trapped in the uncertainty generated by layers of falsehood within a complex process of consciousness manipulation. The figure who arrives at the castle where Dr. Murnau conducts experiments on altering the human physique is Carol, the person least connected to Anton. A childhood friend, he is the only one who genuinely comprehends the suffering and inner turmoil of Gast-Adam. From the outset, Carol accepts that the man introducing himself as Anton Adam is indeed who he claims to be, yet he remains sceptical of the account detailing how the system fabricated this identity through memory insertion. His dilemma endures: to determine which of the two names truly reflects the identity of the person before him. It is evident that a person's name serves as a marker of identity, or, as René Guénon observes, «The "name"» of a being, even when interpreted literally, can be considered an expression of its "essence"» (Guénon, 2013: 67). In his characteristic, reflective style, Antonie Plămădeală captures Carol's state of uncertainty: «If the memory-grafting story was true – and he had no reason to doubt it as long as he had no scientific basis for denying it, now that science was making unprecedented advances and as long as he had no other plausible explanation, as he himself, Gast-Adam, had no other explanation –, it meant that before him was Peter Gast with the memory of Anton Adam, and it was not at all a situation where one could easily pick out the man's name, and not only his name, but his whole being, his ontic identity, as the philosophers would say» (Plămădeală, 2013: 305). It is precisely this

uncertainty that drives Carol to seek the true account – or the underlying reality – that might resolve the enigma of Anton Adam/Peter Gast's identity.

Antonie Plămădeală's novel thus offers, in parabolic form, a reconstruction of the existential drama of the individual mutilated by the ideology of the totalitarian state. It affirms that evil can be defeated only through the continual human effort to rediscover the image of God – the primordial "Adam" – within the inner being of each person who has been deformed by a "Murnau." In this context, technology – serving here as a metaphor for the communist regime – achieves its intended purpose: the suppression of human values, the cultivation of uncertainty regarding one's own identity, the instillation of self-directed fear, the numbing of consciousness, and the coercion to renounce one's humanity. Rejection, social isolation, and physical and emotional abandonment drive the protagonist into a profound ontological and identity crisis, or, as Andrei Țurcanu observes: «The irremediable fall into an everyday life ruled by the laws of terror and fear, the docile submission to its imperatives and restrictions means an ontological collapse» (Țurcanu, 2016: 124). This existential tragedy, together with the moral transgressions it entails, cannot be assessed, analysed, or reconsidered by the architects of techno-science, for they have no regard for the depths of the inner being; rather, they consciously repudiate and denigrate it.

The comparative reading of *Frankenstein* and *Three Hours in Hell* reveals a common thematic axis: the dehumanizing potential of technology when driven by ambition devoid of empathy and ethical responsibility. Both Victor Frankenstein's scientific transgression and Murnau's totalitarian experiment annihilate identity, sever emotional bonds, and deny the intrinsic value of the subject, replacing the *imago Dei* with an artificial construct. In these literary universes, the absence of care, recognition, and a sense of belonging transforms the act of creation into oppression, and innovation into an instrument of alienation. Literature thus becomes a space for the imaginative exploration of the consequences of abusive intrusions into human life and of moral transgressions that, over time, may inflict profound harm upon the individual. In this respect, technology turns into a dangerous instrument when guided by malicious intent, particularly when it acts in opposition to nature and to the fundamental principles of humanity.

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