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ON THE EVIL IN LERMONTOV AND SHELLEY

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In analysing any of the greatest works of Romanticism, one will sooner or later have to take into account the crucial role of 'the evil' within each of the tales. Any intention of definitely understanding this subject as well as the attempt to separate it from the tale as a whole would of course be presumptuous. The use of 'the evil' in inverted commas in this work (which is perhaps the way in which the word should always be used) shall point to the somewhat vague and undefined nature of the term. While evilness often seems to be regarded as something that is absolute and fully defining a character rather than being ambiguous or even indefinite, this approach is untenable if 'the evil' is understood as an original part of the individual.

Considering a Romantic context, a less restricted interpretation of the word–and the underlying meaning–appears more appropriate. In full awareness of the problematic definition of the term, 'evilness' shall here be discussed in its meaning within Romantic tales. Since this is but a comparatively short essay, the topic must of course be narrowed down. Thoughts and considerations concerning the developments and manifestations of an 'evil' side in a character that shall here be presented will therefore be limited to chosen characters in two specific works: Mary Shelley's immortal *Frankenstein* and *Princess Mary*, a chapter in *A Hero of Our Time* by Michael Lermontov.

For investigating evilness in *Frankenstein*, the being created by Victor Frankenstein, most obviously endowed with the capacity of doing evil deeds, seems to be a reasonably adequate choice. The creature, however, can by no means be understood as *the* embodiment of evil (as opposed to Frankenstein, who would thus be *the* embodiment of nobility). Such a reading of Shelley's novel would be poor and extremely simplistic: For one thing, the 'dark' side in Victor cannot be negated–much has been written about it and it shall not be treated in the present work; for another, the monster himself is not merely a vicious being, but has been impelled to his actions by the human race.

In respect thereof, Frankenstein's behaviour is of considerable interest: From the very first moment on, he seems to be convinced of his creature being irrevocably bad and worthless. A certain state of shock in view of his successful experiment is absolutely comprehensible–perhaps to a large part evoked by the horrid countenance of the being–but Frankenstein continues to refuse any dialogue with his creation. Despite him being a scientifically thinking person, who

is otherwise very well capable of logical reasoning, Frankenstein's actions pertaining to his creation are thoroughly irrational. At least at the beginning he has no reason (that is, no reason that can be explained with cold logic) to believe the creature to be fundamentally evil; nonetheless, he does so with all his heart. He turns away in horror, whereby he unknowingly seals his own and his family's fate.

This seems even more tragic and somehow ironic if one takes into account the creature's real initial character, of which the reader, just as Frankenstein, acquires knowledge much later: when it is too late. It is only after the monster has committed the most abominable crimes that his creator can be convinced to listen to the creature's story. A story that indeed evokes an impression of truth; the reader is torn between compassion and aversion, but is driven to believe in the initial goodness of the creature. Was he not full of an ever-burning desire for love and of an unconditionally compassionate disposition? Was it not mankind alone who in their cruelty and prepossession gave rise to his desire to kill? Only after the rejection from the people who meant so much to him, the creature feels something 'evil' inside himself: *"For the first time, feelings of revenge and hatred filled my bosom, and I did not strive to control them […]. But again, when I reflected that they had spurned and deserted me, anger returned, a rage of anger […].*

In account of the above-described reflections, one must naturally conclude that Frankenstein's creature is but a product of his environment; moreover, that his soul once was clean and good. Not because of an inward fault, but because of rejection from the outside did he develop the rage and need for revenge that does not only result in the complete destruction of Victor; the monster is in the course of his actions consciously devastating himself. It is nevertheless important to take the thought even further: It remains without question that the creature is aware of him becoming a monster, a *"miserable wretch"* as he repeatedly calls himself. This 'rising of the evil' suggests two important facts:

Firstly, that the being is *human* to an almost frightening extent: parallel to the rapid expansion of his senses and physical skills, he undergoes a most painful psychological and emotional development. Although all of this happens with superhuman strength and speed, it is not less human in its core. How could we relate to it otherwise? Mankind has not yet learned to understand anything that is not lying somewhere within themselves– somewhere hidden perhaps, but nevertheless idiosyncratic to the human nature.

From this point it is only a small step to the realisation that, secondly, one of the most important features of the creature (the fundamental one, I daresay) is the freedom to choose; he is, in other words, in possession of a *free will*. Bearing this in mind, the meaning of the story of

Frankenstein's creation undergoes a transformation: His end as a wretched and 'evil' monster is not merely the consequence of a straight storyline that could not have been changed, but rather *one* of the possible outcomes that were opened to the being under the influence of all that has happened AND under the influence of his own, individual feeling and thinking.

Therefore, the reader is forced to reconsider the assumption that Frankenstein's creature began his life as initially 'good', as well as the idea of him ending it as a barely 'evil' being.

If we now directed our looks towards the hero of *Princess Mary* and compare him–the glorious, witty and deeply sad Pechorin–to the monster, would we not find an in many ways akin story? Rejection from the very first moment in life and constantly growing self-shielding, bitterness and yes, a certain 'evilness' as a result:

> *"All have read upon my countenance the marks of bad qualities, which were not existent; but they were assumed to exist — and they were born. I was modest — I was accused of slyness: I grew secretive. I profoundly felt both good and evil — no one caressed me, all insulted me: I grew vindictive. I was gloomy — other children merry and talkative; I felt myself higher than they — I was rated lower: I grew envious. I was prepared to love the whole world — no one understood me: I learned to hate […]. Fearing ridicule, I buried my best feelings in the depths of my heart, and there they died. I spoke the truth — I was not believed: I began to deceive. Having acquired a thorough knowledge of the world and the springs of society, I grew skilled in the science of life; and I saw how others without skill were happy, enjoying gratuitously the advantages which I so unweariedly sought."*

Downright accusing of the outside is, despite all the biting bitterness that speaks from these words, not all that can be read in them: Pechorin gives the impression of being torn between resentment towards the world and hate that he turns against himself. One shall of course not forget that the quoted speech is delivered with a certain calculation, as it is addressed to Princess Mary; still, the reader cannot negate the rise of compassion. It is almost as if we have to believe him, because it just…. doesn't feel like a lie. We are maybe not able to explain our impression in a rational way because Pechorin himself is entirely irrational. Otherwise so eloquent and such a precise observer of others, Pechorin struggles with understanding and explaining his own character, to a degree that leads him to contradict himself: In the same sentence he claims that his *"bad qualities"* were *"not existent"* and states that *"they were born"*. And when he remembers that he was *"prepared to love the whole world"* (what a desperate need for affection speaks from this phrase!), we ask ourselves as we read on: what a love is one that is given by someone who believes himself to be *"higher"* than others? Although Pechorin himself might not realise it, the greatest truth that he offers in this speech probably lies in the sentence *"I*

profoundly felt both good and evil". The double meaning of this declaration is deeply significant; it does not only imply that the ability for strong and true feelings was given to him, but also that BOTH, good and evil, were seeded within his soul.

Here again, the similarity to Frankenstein's creature is striking. In both cases, we find an extraordinarily gifted character with a keen perception as well as the gift to truly understand other human beings. Both feel that they are not 'normal' and therefore misunderstood by their *"fellow creatures"* (to adopt Mary Shelley's perfect phrasing), so they are driven to turn against humanity.

It shall be emphasized–although it might seem ridiculous because the fact is evident enough–that Pechorin and the creature are neither in the exact same situation nor are their reactions to their surroundings alike. The difference is remarkable enough if one looks for instance at the way in which each of them puts himself in relation to others. It has already been stressed that Pechorin does feel superior to most other human beings; something that can be taken from numerous remarks and actions towards others and is almost too obvious in his comments about himself. The being created by Frankenstein, on the other hand, appears to be rating himself lower than the human race, at least during the time with 'his' cottagers:

> *"When I slept or was absent, the forms of the venerable blind father, the gentle Agatha and the excellent Felix, flitted before me. I looked upon them as superior beings, who would be the arbiters of my future destiny."*

Rather than focusing on the differences that can be found between all individuals (may they be real or figures in a fantastic tale), precisely because they are individuals, it is of greater interest to turn back to the analogies. What thitherto has been suggested shall once again be emphasized: Neither Pechorin nor the being created by Frankenstein (who at first is merely a 'creature' and then turns into the 'monster' as that he shall be known henceforth) begin their lives as purely 'good': the *possibility* of 'evilness' slumbers in their souls. On the other hand, neither of them is only 'evil' in the end: neither of their destinies was 'destined' as it were.

In Pechorin, we can see an occasional flickering of a craving for love as well as true desperation that seems to arise directly from his soul. Usually, he instantly tries to deny such a sentiment before himself, either with sharp sarcasm or utter negation of the truth (*"'Why do they all hate me?' I thought — 'why? Have I affronted anyone? No. Can it be that I am one of those men the mere sight of whom is enough to create animosity?'"*).

Then again, he attempts to convince himself of his own 'evilness', successfully in most cases, but at times failing miserably; it even happens that he lets parts of the truth come to him (*"I sometimes despise myself . . . Is not that the reason why I despise others also? . . . I have grown incapable of noble impulses; I am afraid of appearing ridiculous to myself."*).

Pechorin uses his 'evil' parts to form a shield between him and others who could possibly hurt him. In a much more forceful and direct way, Frankenstein's creature does the very same: he has been hurt so badly that the fear of ever feeling love again is worse than the contempt which he would feel, should he dare to look at his own deeds. Both react to their surroundings in a way that is singular to their individual character and both make use of the only weapon that is at their command: That which lies within them.

The rather slithery nature of the 'evil' that has been expressed in the beginning of this text does indeed make it difficult to say anything concrete about its development in a human being. Lermontov and Shelley gave us truly wonderful pictograms of a human soul (it appears only right to speak of a *human* soul, also in the case of Frankenstein's creation), each in their own way, but both within a Romantic understanding. Is not the human nature something that is essentially Romantic in itself?

The given examples and the observations that have been made upon them show, if anything, that nothing is ever concrete and certainly not straight-lined. Human beings are too complicated to be fully comprehended by others or even themselves. No one ever is or can be exclusively evil; no one's soul can consist but of light either–how could anything dark touch pure light? We must thus linger somewhere in between (without quite understanding in between *what*). Rather unsatisfying as this may be, it does at least leave enough space for interpretation.