

# Æstheticising the Impossible: the Strange Case of the Gothic and Science Fiction

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## Abstract

In the history of human creativity, the act of imagining the impossible has been at the core of the physical and metaphysical perception of the unknown. The scholarly debate regarding the nature of the impossible gained particular relevance in the context of British Enlightenment when the expanding sciences, along with literature, attempted to provide empirical validation to inexplicable and supernatural phenomena. In this way, the discrepancies between the overlapping ontologies of the Age of Faith and the Age of Reason became apparent as the ancestral literary practice of the fantastic merged with the rising genre of the novel. The assimilation of the conventional tropes of supernatural literature within the narrative frame of formal realism led to the development of two fortunate sub-genres: the Gothic and Science Fiction. The former evolved around the mutual disruption of the empirically-based conception of reality and the transgression of the moral code implied in the construction of civic order. The latter derived from the relocation of specific gothic features into a larger dimension of social anxiety concerning the abuses of reason concealed as a path towards common good and future progress.

By exploring the evolution of the gothic imagery and its dissolution into the narrative horizon of Science Fiction, this article will trace the early modern roots of the permeation between science and literature in the human quest for the impossible. The thesis that Gothic and Science Fiction are historically

interdependent will be reviewed in light of the common matrix of fear and desire which characterises their ideological function.

**Keywords**

Fantastic, Gothic Novel, Science Fiction, Mary Shelley

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'Tis an establish'd maxim in metaphysics, that whatever the mind clearly conceives includes the idea of possible existence, or in other words, that nothing we imagine is absolutely impossible.

David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*

## **1. Introduction: Arenas of Modern *Impossibilia***

As the basic pattern of human creativity, imagining the impossible can be regarded as the condition of possibility for the conceptual understanding of what lies beyond the ordinary constraints of reality (James 2002). Such a momentum toward the intangible realm of the infinite has characterised the scholarly inquiries of mathematicians, philosophers, novelists, scientists, and all sorts of visionaries across the ages, becoming a milestone in the historical process that witnessed the birth of modernity. Indeed, in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries the pervasive penetration of the codes and discursive practices of experimental epistemology in almost every field of knowledge led to the development of new empirical approaches to the measurement of *impossibilia* against the foil of the cognitive frames of the real perceivable world (Fludernik 1996). In this way, by equating the impossible to the unnaturalness that eludes the principles of logical causation, both modern science and fiction embraced the challenge of providing rational explanations to

wondrous and supernatural phenomena, thus bridging the gap between the overlapping world-views of faith and reason. The clash of ontologies triggered by the debate about the status of the inadmissible soon acquired a prominent role in both the literature and science of British Enlightenment culture. On the one hand, within the sphere of literary production, the multifaceted forms of what we now call “the fantastic” took over the novelistic market as the privileged site for the representation of the same principle of empirical validation entailed to the rise of the new science. On the other hand, by questioning the very notion of divine, science irreversibly impacted the social construction of the everyday real, paving the way to the development of new kinds of technologies which not only revolutionised the domestic environment, but also rapidly transformed the country into a capitalistic world power. The general climate of anxiety and excitement that accompanied such radical changes was successfully intercepted by the cannibalistic genre of the novel,<sup>1</sup> and in particular by two sub-genres that at various moments have been associated with the fantastic, i.e. the Gothic and Science Fiction.

Often referred to as the daring form to speak the “socially unspeakable”, the Gothic is one of the ideological products of—rather than a reaction to—the Age of Reason (Punter 1980). This is due to its intrinsic tendency to renegotiate the limits of what characterises evil while testing the boundaries of moral and social acceptability. At the same time, the growing interest in moral behavior along with the apprehension for ethical accountability regarding the consequences of scientific progress soon became the propelling forces that pushed the boundaries of the early gothic writing into the domain of Science Fiction. But what are the specific narratological features at the basis of

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of the novel as an aggressive genre swallowing up pre-existent forms and conventions was coined by Michael McKeon: «the newcomer that arrives upon a scene already articulated into conventional generic categories and proceeds to cannibalise and incorporate bits of other forms» (McKeon 1987: 11).

such a drift? Have these two genres evolved in separate directions or have they merged in a new unified fictional horizon?

In the attempt to answer these questions, in what follows I will analyse the early modern roots of the dialogue between literature and science within the cultural experience of the representation for the impossible. I will begin by addressing the ideological function informing the evolution of the fantastic and its most representative sub-genres. I will then proceed by highlighting the specific traits of the gothic imagery at the basis of the narrative field of Science Fiction focusing on the pivotal role of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and *The Last Man* (1826) as the original departing point of the enduring interdependency of the two genres. The conclusions will point out how both gothic and science-fiction writing rely on a shared emotional and cognitive dimension of fear linked to the counterfactual exploration of the unknown.

## **2. Narratives of the Impossible: The Fantastic from the ancient epic to the gothic novel**

Defined by Todorov as the form of “ontological hesitation” of the enquiring mind once confronted to potentially impossible scenarios (Todorov 1975), the fantastic is a main fictional mode of modern literary production. One of its earliest precursors can be found in the supernatural characters and portents typical of the fictional universe of ancient epic. In this genre the pervasive immanence of divine is associated, however, to the place of the individual in the organic whole of the cosmic order. As Ortega y Gasset states, in ancient epic «the gods stand for a dynasty under which the impossible is possible» (Ortega y Gasset 1965: 138), therefore Homer or Virgil's heroes never really question or doubt the nature of the laws behind their encounters with the supernatural. This same attitude toward the status of the fantastic is perpetuated in the Middle Ages when the rise of popular genres such as fairy tales, literary ballads, or chivalric romances extensively deployed magic and wondrous motifs encompassing folk models

within the narrative framework of moralising storytelling. Assumed as familiar and rarely explained, in medieval romance the preternatural functioned as an indicator of the personal qualities of the chivalric heroes while laying the basis for the construction of the new code of values of the aristocratic ideology. Not only did the exceptionality of the quests and endeavours of Arthurian knights serve to assess their worthiness, it also measured their conformity to the Christian ontology reflected in the courtly ideals (Sweene 2000). This same medieval world-view will later be subjected to a radical reconfiguration during the Renaissance; a period characterised by the scholarly attempt to depict a modern image of the universe through the new paradigms of physics and natural philosophy (Gatti 1989). As Thomas Pavel points out, the pervasive use of the supernatural in Shakespeare's works should be considered in light of the cultural process of assimilation of the "peripheral shadows" of the late medieval world into the modern one (Pavel 1986). In the same spirit of ontological coexistence, Milton's *Paradise Lost* managed to portray and somewhat resolve the contradictions implied in the natural and political philosophy of post-civil war England by portraying a new conception of nature that is partly independent of God as well as directly responding to His centralised divine power.

Less than fifty years later, the ontological harmony of the Great Chain of Being that both Elizabethan drama and Milton's epic had contributed to undermine was irreversibly discarded by early Enlightenment culture. The proliferation of a new kind of materialism derived by the progress of the new science threatened Christian theology and changed the traditional conception of the fantastic and the supernatural. Indeed, while the mechanistic worldview envisaged by Descartes and Hobbes was increasingly depriving the material sphere of any divine agency, the persistence of puritan theology elevated God as the only source and directing hand of earthly events. Beyond the rhetorical debate carried out through the pamphlets and

philosophical essays of the newly born scientific community,<sup>2</sup> the war of words between theology and science, and in particular between Christian providentialism and empirical materialism, was primarily fought within the emergent field of “empirical” writing. By incorporating the old schemes of Romance into the empirical attitude toward verisimilitude typical of formal realism, genres such as the apparition narrative gained the favour of the reading public using the preternatural as the ultimate tool for the ontological inquiry of the unseen. This was mainly configured in terms of first-hand experiences of inexplicable phenomena, such as apparitions of ghosts and all sorts of otherworldly beings.<sup>3</sup> Even though they were originally conceived as factual reports and testimonies, apparition narratives soon abandoned their scientific and theological matrix to become, over the course of the eighteenth century, the recognisable body of fiction that will constitute the formal premises for the fortunate season of the gothic novel.

As recent scholarship has pointed out, the representation of supernatural in the gothic genre, whether rationally explained or simply accepted,<sup>4</sup> responds to an implicit logic of correspondence

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<sup>2</sup> Even though the eighteenth century can certainly be considered as the cradle of the deist, materialist, and agnostic doctrines that so profoundly subverted the whole system of religious belief and its institutions, a direct confrontation between religion and science did not take place until the second half of the nineteenth century. While religious thinkers tended to be fiercely defensive about the spirit of enquiry of modern natural philosophy men of science showed a more cautious awareness of their limits. (Capoferro 2010)

<sup>3</sup> «The new science [...] carried with it an insistence that all truths be demonstrated, an emphasis on the need for direct experience, and a disinclination to accept inherited dogmas without putting them to the test» (Thomas 1971).

<sup>4</sup> The differentiation between supernatural accepted and explained within gothic fiction is crucial in Todorov’s theorisation of the fantastic: «The fantastic therefore leads a life full of dangers, and may evaporate at any moment. It seems to be located on the frontier of two genres, the marvellous

between the surfacing of wondrous instances and the drive of unnatural impulses that contravene the social intercourse. This specular disruption of the empirically-based conceptions of reality and the transgression of the moral order (Capoferro 2010) can be found in *The Castle of Otranto*, with Manfred's incestuous desire for Matilda emerging in concomitance with the ghostly apparition of the monstrous helmet. The same threat of violation of the terms of appropriateness implied in the social contract is also reflected in another specific feature of the genre, namely the theme of survival of the innocent in the face of a persecution. Here, the illegitimate appetite of the villain to acquire something that he lacks finds its correlative in the motif of the damsel-in-distress where the depravity of stereotypical aristocrats or clergymen must be read as the literary transfiguration of the civic anxiety enabled by a new social imaginary based on the limitation of individual freedom in favour of public order (Perazzini 2013). In this perspective, the claustrophobic imagery of abductions, confinements, secret passages, or even demoniac possessions that characterises gothic genre specificity interprets the general discourse of deviance as a form of moral and social failing. Indeed, in its modern form as lunacy and madness, deviance becomes the extreme manifestation of the dangers of promethean individualism within the

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and the uncanny, rather than to be an autonomous genre. One of the great periods of supernatural literature, that of the Gothic novel, seems to confirm this observation. Indeed, we generally distinguish, within the literary Gothic, two tendencies: that of the supernatural explained (the "uncanny"), as it appears in the novels of Clara Reeve and Ann Radcliffe; and that of the supernatural accepted (the "marvellous"), which is characteristic of the works of Horace Walpole, M. G. Lewis, and Maturin. Here we find not the fantastic in the strict sense, only genres adjacent to it. More precisely, the effect of the fantastic is certainly produced, but during only a portion of our reading: in Ann Radcliffe, up to the moment when we are sure that the supernatural events will receive no explanation. Once we have finished reading, we understand — in both cases — that what we call the fantastic has not existed» (Todorov 1975: 42).



increasingly regulated context of eighteenth-century civil society.<sup>5</sup> Just like the case of many hero-villains in Lewis's or Radcliffe's works, the unrestrained attitude of the characters make them fail their community in the attempt to overcome the limits of the impossible for either selfish reasons or for the sake of scientific progress. The character type that mostly connects the figure of the overreaching individual to the theme of man's violation of social and natural laws is certainly the gothic alchemist: a modern rewriting of the Faustian genius whose superior, as yet secret and outlawed, knowledge allows him to rebel against authority and challenge dominant ideologies.

On the basis of these premises, in the next section I will analyse the confluence of gothic imagery into the new genre dimension of Science Fiction with particular reference to the assimilation of the discourse of modern science into the cultural scheme of alchemy in novels such as William Godwin's *St. Leon* (1799) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. I will then focus on Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* as an early example of the broad, multi-genre category of speculative fiction where the imaginative construction of post-apocalyptic futures stands out as a main trope.

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<sup>5</sup> Derived from *pro-mathein*, think ahead, the term *promethean* obviously refers to the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus as it appears from the writings of Hesiod and Aeschylus. According to Pseudo-Apollodorus, the Titan was the main responsible for the creation of the human race, forming our ancestors out of clay, and the subsequent development of civilisation thanks to the gift of fire, stolen from the sun. Leading to human advance in writing, mathematics, agriculture, medicine, and science, Prometheus' gift to mankind violated the will of the Gods. For this insubordinate act of trespass against the sanctity of the divine realm, Prometheus was punished by Zeus and this is the reason why Prometheus is historically associated with hubris, overstepping of limits into forbidden territories, and violating the sacred.

### **3. The Literary Roots of Modern *Impossibilities*: *Frankenstein, The Last Man, and the Birth of Science Fiction***

The disruptive coexistence of the realms of magic and supernatural into the epistemological paradigm of Enlightenment culture contributed to further expand the aesthetics of modern *impossibilities*. Among the most powerful tropes featuring the dissident potential of such a discourse, the gothic alchemist is certainly noteworthy in light of its function as generic precursor of Science Fiction's character type of the mad scientist. Embodying the ontological friction between the old system of pre-Baconian metaphysics and the scientific rationalism that would dominate the following century, alchemy is defined by the fourth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1810 as «that branch of chemistry which had for its principal objects the transmutation of metals into gold; the panacea, or universal remedy [...] and many other things equally ridiculous». Notwithstanding the clearly derisive trait of such a description, before the rise of the new science in the seventeenth century, alchemy was one of the places where natural philosophy was carried out. In particular, the study of the physical properties of the elements (chemistry), the treatment of diseases (medicine), or the disposition of the stars (astronomy) appeared as a contradictory and yet unified mixture of disciplines whose theoretical value relied in its inclusiveness and comprehensiveness. In time, the magical elements inherent to this body of knowledge were gradually dissolved under the attacks of materialist and mechanistic scholarship so that by the end of the eighteenth century the orthodoxy of Enlightenment epistemology had completely eradicated any mystical and supernatural component from the domain of natural sciences. Such a dissolution was elaborated by the literature of terror through a modern interpretation of the character type of the anarchic alchemist as in the case of William Godwin's philosophical fable *St. Leon*. In this work, Godwin substitutes explicit supernaturalism with St. Leon's mastering of the secret

discipline allowing his character to rise above the mundane state of coercion entailed in the domestic ideology and the patriarchal institutions of marriage and primogeniture. However, in the pursuit of the ancestral quest for the secret elixir of eternal life and wealth, St. Leon's aspiration to greatness are constantly frustrated by the dominant order. In fact, his attempts to use the newly acquired alchemical skills for altruistic purposes result in continuous persecution as his magical powers end up destroying his family while dooming him to an immortal and solitary wandering across the world.<sup>6</sup>

A few years later, a similar fate is encountered by Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein: the creator-figure made of «a peculiar mixture of artist, philosopher, craftsman, and chemical experimenter» (Baldick 1987: 63) who finds its most resonant echoes today in popular horror and science-fiction culture. Indeed, the deranged demiurge of Geneva embodies the dream of reason that produces monsters, as Francisco Goya would put it. Progenitor not only of his hideous creature but also of a long line of mad scientists like Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll, Wells's Dr. Moreau, or even down to the most contemporary Dr. Strangelove, Victor Frankenstein works as a characterisation of the Enlightenment culture of science where chemistry, electricity, and experimental research in general, «are associated to values such as atheism, materialism, and hubris that contributed to fuel the negative view on the discipline» (Schummer 2006: 101). In particular, Shelley's construction of Victor Frankenstein as an outcast genius is strongly indebted to Godwin's radical thought and work as well as his adaptation of the trope of the gothic alchemist. As Fred Botting has shown, in *Frankenstein* the cultural scheme of alchemy functions as a contrastive ideology that highlights the coercive power of dominant familial, intellectual and scientific forces that influence Victor's young

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<sup>6</sup> For a critical account of Godwin's *St. Leon* as the gothic paradigm of the modern alchemist, see the interesting contribution by Evert Jan van Leeuwen, *Romantic Alchemists: dissident androgyny in Anglo-American gothic fiction from Godwin to Melville*. Lewiston (New York), Edwin Mellen Press, 2011.

developing mind (Botting 1991).<sup>7</sup> In fact, Victor's first engagement with natural philosophy as an untutored and brilliant boy is portrayed as a fortuitous encounter with a «volume of the works of Cornelius Agrippa», a German alchemist of the sixteenth century. His reaction to such book is enthusiastic—«A new light seemed to dawn upon my mind» (Shelley, 1992: 23)<sup>8</sup>—but as soon as he relates his exciting discovery to his father, this latter comments: «Ah! Cornelius Agrippa! My dear Victor, do not waste your time upon this; it is sad trash» (F: 25). Notwithstanding his father's censorship, young Victor's fascination with alchemy continues in secrecy when he declares that he has become a “disciple” of Albertus Magnus, a Dominican friar and master of the occult: «He was a famous Magician, and that he had formed a machine in the shape of a man, which served him as an oracle». Like Albertus, Victor «entered with the greatest diligence into the search of the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life. But the latter obtained my most undivided attention: wealth was an inferior object; but what glory would attend the discovery, if I could banish disease from the human frame, and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!» (F: 26). Later in the novel, when entering to the university of Ingolstadt, Victor is further encouraged to abandon the childish chimeras of alchemy to take up new science. His apprenticeship in modern chemistry and physiology fuelled his thirst for discovery pushing his enquiry beyond the limits of agreed knowledge: «None but those who have experienced them can conceive of the enticements of science. In other studies you go as far as others have gone before you, and there is nothing more to know; but in a scientific pursuit there is continual food for discovery and wonder» (F: 34). At this stage, it is clear that Victor has never actually forsaken alchemy or magic, he has just supplemented it and «animated by an

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<sup>7</sup> For a thorough interpretation of Victor Frankenstein's connection with alchemy see Markman, Ellis, “Fictions of science in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*”, in *Sydney Studies in English*, Vol. 25, 1999: 27–46.

<sup>8</sup> All further references to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* will be quoted as *F*.

almost supernatural enthusiasm» he begins to tackle the “bold” question concerning the creation of life: «Whence ... did the principle of life proceed?» (*F*: 35).

In this perspective, channelling the scientific discourse within the narrative horizon of supernatural literature, Shelley’s *Frankenstein* interprets the social anxieties of modern experience regarding the inability of humanity to deal with the products and consequences of science and technology. The very monstrosity of the creature responds to a logic of transmutations of the supernatural into the cultural scheme of alchemy where Frankenstein’s artificial Adam can be interpreted in terms of what Michael Foucault defined as antiphysis: a form of aberration that both eludes the laws of nature and defies our categories of understanding, whether these be civil, scientific, religious, ethical or aesthetical (Foucault 1974). Several aspects make Frankenstein’s creature unnatural while other attributes make it supernatural. In primis its unearthly ugliness (*F*: 157), as the monster is unnatural for it was created in an unnatural way by an unnatural method. Then, the «spark of being» (*F*: 34) used to bring the inanimate collection of limbs to life is surrounded by an aura of supernatural mysticism. Likewise, by abusing the natural force of electricity to stimulate «the lifeless thing» (*F*: 158), Frankenstein leaves the ordinary course of nature and produces something abnormal and supernatural whose physical power exceeds that of human beings. For all these reasons, the fear Shelley’s monster evokes is not a mere reflection of its anatomical abjection or unearthly strength but the mirror of the contemporary concerns regarding the future progress of mankind. In other words, the awareness that scientific knowledge could evolve to the extent of creating such abominations appears to be more frightening than any sort of gothic imaginary ghost.

Besides the obsession with alchemy and magic, Shelley’s novel retains from the Gothic a series of distancing features that induce readers’ critical perspective about the accepted values and beliefs of modern society as well as the nature of knowledge itself, which in a familiar setting would have been too destabilizing. Such features can be either thematic, including the use of exotic and sublime European

locations, or narratological, such as the use of the story-within-the-story device and the presence of multiple unreliable narrators.<sup>9</sup> In particular, the fact that *Frankenstein* presents the reader with three first-person narrative voices with no external guide to arbitrate between their frequently contradictory perspectives, generates a novel which places a huge emphasis on the reader's own interpretative response thus stimulating a continuous evaluation of the validity of the characters' words and actions. In addition to that, the series of subjectified versions of the tale produced by *Frankenstein's* unreliable narrators leads to the construction of the sense of cognitive estrangement intrinsic to both the fantastic and the gothic genres that further contributes to externalise the inward scrutiny of the maniacal

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<sup>9</sup> An unreliable narrator is a narrator whose credibility has been seriously compromised. These are almost by definition first-person narrators who hide essential information or deliberately mislead the reader in order to preserve the surprise ending. The unreliable narrator can make delusional claims or being severely mentally ill, or even appear as a character in a frame story. For example, Shelley's character of Captain Walton constitutes an immediate problem for the readers. His lack of education, paired with his lack of experience and his young age as captain of an expedition (*F*: 28), make him unreliable for readers; should Captain Walton have been more advanced in age, he would seem more reliable, thanks to his greater experience. Furthermore, Captain Walton records Victor Frankenstein's story; the fact that Walton serves as a middle man creates a dilemma with regards to the accuracy of the story. Walton openly admits that he can only listen to Frankenstein's story during the moments in his expedition when he is available and free from his captain's duties; afterwards, he must record the story as he remembers it from what Frankenstein has told him (*F*: 63). This leaves an uncomfortable amount of room for human error in the transcription of Frankenstein's story. Readers have no way of checking what Walton transcribes, and no way of knowing whether Frankenstein omits details of his story. Neither do readers know whether Walton chooses to omit some of the story Frankenstein has told him. Hence, the novel's narrator is unreliable, and readers are left to ponder the truth of the story.

mind into a larger-scale imagery of disaster which will be at the core of the science-fiction genre.

The interest in the above mentioned formula of catastrophe and generalised aesthetic of destruction constitute the structuring principle of another less fortunate novel by Mary Shelley which appeared in 1826 with the evocative title of *The Last Man*. Often considered as the ultimate transition of the Gothic into the world of Science Fiction, *The Last Man* problematises the fictional type of the story of the future constructing an apocalyptic fantasy revolving around the end of civilisation. The plot deals with the lives of six characters among the supposedly final generation of humans on earth, all progressively destroyed by an uncontrollable plague, whose personal and domestic interests are contextualised in the collective scale of political needs of the collapsing order. Rather than in a remote medieval past, Shelley's imagination of a worldwide disaster is dislocated in an unusually far-distanced future, a 21st century England not quite dissimilar from the 19th century one.<sup>10</sup> This allows a double scrutiny on both the level of the individual dimension of characters—failing to escape or survive the disease—and the public extent of the disaster through the description of the ways in which society and democracy would likely fall in the face of such a calamity (Fisch 1993). Readers of Gothic fiction will recognise in *The Last Man* the same distancing techniques

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<sup>10</sup> Considering the extensive use of carriages, steam boats and flying balloons as principal means of transportation in the novel, Shelley's futuristic-setting is quite anachronistic. Such a lack of more inventive and daring inquiry of the theme of material technology into the story has been harshly criticised. However, as Robert Scholes points out: «The consciousness that history is an irreversible process led man inevitably to a new view of the future [...]. The idea that the future might be radically different in its social or economic organisation was unthinkable until some time in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, and the impact of irreversible technological change did not become apparent until the nineteenth. The result of these and other developments was that man could finally conceive of the future historically» (Scholes 1975: 14).

employed by Matthew Lewis or Ann Radcliffe to generate sufficient fictional separation from the real cultural events of the time so as to avoid political censorship. At the same time, Shelley's revision of inherently gothic themes such as loss, isolation, and, most importantly, survival in the key of a specific imagery of futuristic eschatology seems to respond to a deliberate attempt to formalise «gothic preoccupations in guises which [did] not pay lip-service to the dominant trappings of the genre» (Punter 1980: 116).

From what has been stated so far, the role of Mary Shelley's work in the migration of gothic writing into the realm of Science Fiction appears unquestionable. However, many other writers can be and have been counted among the pioneers of the genre, especially on the other shore of the Atlantic. For example, authors like Hawthorne, Melville, and most peculiarly Poe contributed to the genesis of modern Science Fiction through a series of hybrid works exploring an uncanny imagery of automation. In Hawthorne's *The Artist of the Beautiful* (1844) for example, the hero rivals nature by creating a mechanical butterfly whereas Melville's *The Bell-Tower* (1855) reflects on the relationship between creator and creature in one of the first robot stories ever written in English.

Conversely, critics have argued that it was not until the advent of H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, and Hugo Gernsback that a conscious construction of Science Fiction as a genre actually began to take shape (Aldiss 1973). This is certainly due to the unprecedented amount of technological innovations and new scientific theories that emerged in the cradle of Victorian positivism at the fastest pace. In this perspective, the novels that appeared towards the end of the 19th century reflect both the terror and excitement that dominated the spirit of rational inquiry of the time thus blueprinting the architecture of the genre. An example is Stevenson's problematic fable of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). Directly correlated with the real scientific advancements of its Victorian setting, Stevenson's work follows the footsteps of *Frankenstein* questioning the morality of biological engineering while exposing the duality between experimenter and subject in the light of the social responsibilities of the scientist.



As anticipated in the introduction, in this section I have reconstructed the main points of conflation between the gothic discourse and the new narrative instances of science fiction in the works of William Godwin and Mary Shelley. In the next and conclusive section I will concentrate on the genre convergence between Gothic writing and the Science fiction on the basis of their shared emotional matrix of fear.

### **Conclusions: Universal Patterns of Fear**

From the outset the intention of this article was to prove how the narrativization of the impossible, seen in terms of envisaging the unknown and the unseen, has been at the core of both the literary and scientific discourses of the modern age. Juxtaposed to the basic laws and patterns of the real, such a process originated from the novelisations of the literature of supernatural, which evolved an empirically-oriented system of verisimilitude. This latter can therefore be considered as a possible criterion for a general theory of the fantastic where even the farthest ontologically removed settings or the most unlikely contortions of time and space are shaped by the socio-anthropological imagination of realism. From this standpoint, having considered the evolution of modern *impossibilities* within the sphere of supernatural across the centuries, the emergence of the Gothic novel can be read as the stage at which the pre-history of the fantastic ends and its history begins. Indeed, the Gothic resulted from the fusion of various pre-existent genres, such as apparition narratives, the poetry of supernatural, and Elizabethan drama, where the representation of incomprehensible, wondrous occurrences served as the ideological response to the restriction of God's agency that took place throughout the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. At the same time, the transposition of the gothic inward exploration of the private nightmare of characters' deviance into the imagery of disaster in future worlds led to the development of the new genre of science fiction. The distinctive physiognomy of this literary form derives from the conjectural construction of worlds where the laws of the real and the possible as

we know them in our current society are altered. The outcomes of such narrative scenarios can be explored through the two main fictional types of the story of the future and story of invention. The former, articulated around the fantasy of technological or counterfactual prognostication, finds its novelistic correlative in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*. The latter, consisting in a state of affairs marked by the presence of an innovation that imposes an analysis of its implications and consequences, owes its modern formulation to the gothic alchemists of Godwin's *St. Leon* and Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Notwithstanding the general scholarly consensus in identifying the "Frankenstein pattern" as the true origins of Science Fiction (Brantlinger 1980), the article suggested how there is nothing conclusive. For example, Robert M. Philmus locates the beginning of Science Fiction long before Shelley's novel, indicating the lunar landing of Francis Godwin's *The Man in the Moone* (1638) as the first work of the genre (Philmus 1970). Instead, Brian Aldiss argued that the first writers to actually produce epistemologically-committed works of Science Fiction were Jules Verne in the 1870s and H.G. Wells in the 1890s, even if Wells himself believed that his "scientific romances" were a mere transposition of Gothic elements (Aldiss 1973).

In this perspective, despite the distinguished set of tropes and conventions that mark the specificity of the two genres, what actually connects the Gothic and the Science Fiction literary experiences is the common matrix of fear: the cognitive and emotional response that marks the threshold between the known and unknown. As a basic predictive emotion, fear is indeed both the root and the product of the attempt of the Enlightenment reason to bring all things under rational control; the price of the regularisation of the unordinary and the inexplicable. Fear haunts the obscure past of the Gothic settings as well as the dystopian futuristic worlds of Science Fiction. After all, as Sian Mac Arthur points out, «there is much to be frightened of in the concept of the unknown regardless of the context in which the 'unknown' appears» (MacArthur 2015) for past and future dislocations are but the two sides of the same narrativization of the anxieties and

uncertainties experienced by the modern subject while making sense of the impossible.

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