

## The Monstrous Cosmos of Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein*

### ABSTRACT

In her 2019 novel *Frankissstein: A Love Story*, Jeanette Winterson weaves an intricate trans-temporal and trans-spatial multiplicity, the coding of which is governed by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Through the double first-person narrative of Mary Shelley and her 21st-century reincarnation, Ry Shelley, Winterson approaches the literary phenomenon of *Frankenstein* in its entirety, seamlessly traversing and fusing the levels of the novel's production, thematic and formal structuring, and reception. This paper argues that by employing the patchwork nature of Shelley's monster as the principal metaphor for the creation of her own textual hybrid, Winterson upgrades the essentially Cartesian device of metafictional referencing into a *bona fide* world-building device that functions according to the governing principles of the post-Cartesian, i.e., postmodern, ontological order.

**Keywords:** *Frankenstein*, hybridity, metafiction, Postmodernity, Jeanette Winterson

## Pošastni kozmos romana *Frankissstein* Jeannette Winterson

### IZVLEČEK

V letu 2019 izdanem romanu *Frankissstein: A Love Story* Jeannette Winterson stke umetelno transtemporalno in transspacialno mnoštvo, čigar skupni imenovalac je roman *Frankenstein* (1818) Mary Shelley. Skozi preplet prvoosebni pripovedi Mary Shelley in njene sodobne inkarnacije Ryja Shelleyja, Jeannette Winterson tematizira literarni fenomen Frankensteinova v njegovi totalnosti, saj gladko preči in spaja segmente s produkcijske, formalno-vsebinske in recepcijske ravni klasike Mary Shelley. V članku pokažem, da z uporabo principa »patchwork« *Frankensteinove* Pošasti kot podlage za stvaritev lastnega besedilnega hibrida Jeanette Winterson pretvori v osnovi kartezijsko metafikcijsko nanašalnost v legitimno orodje za gradnjo literarnih svetov, ki deluje po načelih postkartezijskega, i.e. postmodernega ontološkega reda.

**Ključne besede:** *Frankenstein*, hibridnost, metafikcija, postmoderna, Jeanette Winterson

# 1 Introduction

*What is your substance, whereof are you made,  
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?*

(Winterson 2019, 5)

Connoisseurs of Shakespeare might flinch at the content of the parenthesis above. It was indeed after much careful consideration that I wrote “Winterson” after what those who know their Shakespeare surely recognize as the opening lines of “Sonnet 53”. But the two lines are so frequently repeated throughout Jeanette Winterson’s 2019 novel *Frankissstein: A Love Story* that they function as the novel’s *leitmotif*. Their unreferenced<sup>1</sup> recurrence in various contexts seamlessly merges their message with the novel’s themes and engages the lines as the node that connects all the different contexts in which they appear into a whole. As the structuring of the novel is the focus of the present paper, the lines also neatly encompass the issues I pursue on these pages.

A reference equally pertinent to the novel’s thematic and formal structuring – as well as to this essay – is the one suggested by its title. *Frankissstein: A Love Story* is a holistic tribute to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). Through the double first-person narrative of Mary Shelley and her 21st-century reincarnation Ry Shelley, Winterson weaves an intricate trans-temporal and trans-spatial multiplicity, the coding of which is governed by Shelley’s masterpiece, and particularly by the *topos* at its core: Frankenstein’s Monster. On the literal level, Winterson recreates the motif of a humanoid composite brought to life by scientific intervention through the lens of contemporary scientific possibilities and the prevailing discourses on the nature of identity and humanness (most notably, queer theory, transhumanism and posthumanism). One of the main protagonists, Ry Shelley, is a transgender physician who identifies as “not one thing. Not one gender. I live with doubleness” (Winterson 2019, 89). His lover Victor Stein, an artificial intelligence savant, is instrumental in an even more literal evocation of Shelley’s central motif. He conducts experiments with body parts Ry supplies from his hospital. Another prominently featured twist on the Monster *topos* are the AI-run sexbots that one of the characters develops and sells.

These *tangible* actualizations of the Monster motif have been duly addressed in existing theoretical treatments of the novel. For example, Ry’s transgender identity was succinctly analysed from the perspective of trans ecology by Maria Ramnehill (2020), combining posthumanist views on identities and bodies as bio-technological constructs with queer theory’s fundamental postulate of the performativity of gender. Likewise, María Estrella’s (2021) analysis of the novel’s representation of the fragmented body relies on current debates on gender identity and transhumanist biotechnological discourse. The tensions between posthumanist and transhumanist representations of hybridity in the novel, be they of the body, gender or sexuality, are featured in Julia Braga Neves’s (2020) study of Winterson’s modernization of Shelley’s themes and motifs. Similarly, Robin Lohmann (2020) briefly

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<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare is never mentioned with regard to the lines, but merely hinted at once. After the lines appear in the novel for the second time, they are followed by a short exchange between the protagonists: “Sonnet 54, said Shelley. Sonnet 53, I said” (Winterson 2019, 15).

charts the doll–human relationship by evaluating the role of the sexbots in the novel, as well as the function of Victor Stein, from the perspective of the relation between humans and technology. Post- and transhumanism, AI, cryogenics and gender are the contexts that the novel is principally associated with. In this regard it is referenced in various studies of contemporary fiction (Holland 2020, 256; Ferreira 2019, 66, 69; O’Callaghan 2020, 78; Omega 2021, 405), and considered in most reviews of the novel.

Though my consideration of *Frankenstein* is also concerned with hybridity, I examine the seemingly less tangible aspects of the Monster metaphor. The lines from Shakespeare quoted at the beginning of this essay (“*What is your substance...*”) are only one instance of a plethora of appropriations swarming Winterson’s narrative. These miscellaneous fragments in fact contribute to the narrative so prominently that they function as an integral part of the novel, regardless of whether one is familiar with them or not. What is this novel’s substance, then? whereof is it made? In my pursuit of the answer to this question, I focus primarily on the relevance of the transtextual<sup>2</sup> and metafictional<sup>3</sup> dimensions of the Monster’s patchwork metaphor to the novel’s organization. I argue that by employing these dimensions as the organizing principle of her own textual hybrid, Winterson constructs literary realities and subjects that conceptually comply with the governing principles of the post-Cartesian ontological order, most succinctly with the non-dualist categories proposed by Jean Baudrillard. Implicit in such structuring of the novel’s literary worlds and protagonists is a significant redefinition of the impact of transtextual and especially metafictional referencing. My intention is therefore also to establish that in *Frankenstein* Winterson employs metafiction as a world-building device that functions according to the governing principles of the present day socio-historical context (i.e., the times of Trump, Brexit, *#MeToo*, etc.), and not as a traditional tool for contesting the reality principle (cf. Holland 2020, 52–53; McCaffery 1976, 22; McHale 180, 1992; Waugh 1984, 2). The novel thus provides an insight into the characteristics of the form and function of literature within the ontology of the current, early stage of the epoch succeeding the Modern Age, henceforth referred to as Postmodernity,<sup>4</sup> and reveals the likely directions of the development of literature within the non-dualist paradigm(s).

## 2 The Novel and Its Socio-Historical Context

In an interview following the release of *Frankenstein: A Love Story*, Winterson explained that the novel grew out of the realization that “everything is relational, everything is about our interaction with something else” (Allardice 2019). Relationality is indeed the central organizing principle in Winterson’s most recent novel, as it is instrumental in the development of the plot,

<sup>2</sup> “Transtextuality” is used here in Gérard Genette’s sense of “all that sets the text in relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” (1997, 1).

<sup>3</sup> My usage of the term “metafictional” relies on Currie’s definition of metafiction as “dramatis[ation of] the boundary between fiction and criticism, either as illusion-breaking authorial intervention or as integrated dramatization of the external communication between author and reader” (2013, 4).

<sup>4</sup> I am using “Postmodernity” cautiously, fully aware of its polysemy in the academic sphere. However, for reasons of practicality, I use it to refer to the initial stage of the socio-historical paradigm change which corresponds to the onset of the post-industrial stage of capitalism after the Second World War (cf. Kos 1995, 7–35). It is the stage that Jameson refers to either as Postmodernism or Postmodernity (2001, 3–6), with implications that Rodriguez Magda associates with Transmodernity (2011, 6–9).

characterisation and narrative perspective. The story begins in 1816 at Lake Geneva where Mary Shelley is vacationing with her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley, her step-sister Claire Clairmont, Claire's lover Lord Byron, and his physician Polidori. The focus of Mary's story are the events surrounding the genesis of *Frankenstein* and its aftermath, which are inextricably connected to her love for and relationship with Percy. As Mary's narrative unwinds, her story merges with that of her novel, as well as with the life and work of her mother Mary Wollstonecraft. The sections of Mary Shelley's narrative alternate with those of Ry Shelley's story, which is set in 2019. Ry, who used to be Mary before undergoing a partial female-to-male sex reassignment surgery and likes "to see at least two people I recognise" in the mirror (Winterson 2019, 89), begins his account with the visit of an expo on robotics in Memphis, Tennessee. There he meets the hostess Claire, *Vanity Fair* journalist Polly D., and the man he came to interview, Ron Lord, who runs a state-of-the-art sex-doll business – as Ron enthusiastically explains, he supplies his customers with "all the pleasure and none of the problems" (2019, 38). In the next section of his narrative, Ry attends a lecture on AI that his lover Victor Stein gives at the Royal Society in London. At the reception afterwards, Ry is reunited with Polly D., Ron Lord, and Claire, Ron's sexbot. The remainder of Ry's narrative revolves around Victor: their love and their relationship, as well as Victor's experimental work which culminates in his attempt to revive the cryogenically preserved brain of his mentor I.J. Good and upload its contents to a robotic homunculus, "a cross between a puppet and a robot" (2019, 265).

The similarity of the names of the protagonists in both narratives (e.g., Lord Byron and Ron Lord, Polly D. and Polidori, Frankenstein and Stein), as well as of the central themes of love and (artistic) creation, suggests that Ry's story is a contemporary variant of Mary's. Moreover, the restructuring of the names and of the contexts in which love and creation are thematically developed signal that the protagonists of the second story are the composites of those in the first. The patchwork metaphor is therefore actualized on the metafictional level of referencing, and on the structural level of character and reality creation: the protagonists of Ry's narrative are not only assembled from those in Mary's narrative through metafictional invocation (such as the "reconstructed" names), their identities are in themselves hybrid. Ry is not only a man who used to be a woman, his body is a composite of both male and female attributes. Victor does not identify as gay although he is in a passionate sexual relationship with Ry: "I'm not gay" (Winterson 2019, 119), he says to Ry, "you don't feel like a man to me when we make love" (2019, 155). Towards the end of the novel, it is suggested that Victor may have been an illusion or even a hallucination, as after his disappearance there are no records of his existence. The "massive outage" that his experiment caused in Manchester, "was simultaneous with a city-wide IT meltdown. Millions of gigabytes of data wiped. Including, says Polly, Victor's records. His phone is dead" (2019, 338). Claire's identity is also liminal: she appears as a human and as a sexbot. When she becomes Ron's lover, she may be either or both: "My first sexbot, really, I suppose, the love of my life, was called Claire. That is, I called her Claire. She's retired now. But, well, to me, sitting here now, it's like you have come back to me in human form" (2019, 239).

The patchwork metaphor is further endorsed on the level of transtextuality, which intersperses the two principal narrative planes. Quotations from Shakespeare, Milton, and other poets, excerpts from biographies, passages from *Frankenstein* and scientific treatises, pamphlets, lyrics from pop songs, and references to contemporary and near-contemporary celebrities

such as Benedict Cumberbatch, BB King, and Johnny Cash, are seamlessly interwoven into the fabric of Mary's and Ry's narratives. As they are mostly unreferenced and unmarked by inverted commas, but often italicized, they are inseparable from the passages which are italicized and which stylistically resemble the *bona fide* quotations; however, if we look for the origins of these passages, no other referent than Winterson can be found.<sup>5</sup> These transtextual elements not only broaden the context of each narrative horizontally, they are also used to connect the two stories diachronically, binding them into a common context.<sup>6</sup>

In order to assess the function and relevance of the novel's indiscriminating fragmentarity and all-encompassing hybridity within the socio-historical context of its conception, circulation and impact, let us briefly outline the fundamental metaphysical tenets of Postmodernity, and their implications for the established notions of the literary subject and literary worlds. The interconnected, multi-dimensional narrative plateaus of *Frankissstein* automatically suggest consideration from the perspective of Deleuze and Guattari's postmodern rhizomatous assemblages and their inherent hybridity (2004, 381–82).<sup>7</sup> However, since the main focus of this study is the novel's structuring, which necessarily involves an enquiry into the nature of its fragmentarity, my analysis relies instead on the conceptual framework developed by Jean Baudrillard. While his key categories of hyperreality and fractal subject conceptually correspond to Deleuzeian heterogeneous multiplicities of postmodern realities and subjects,<sup>8</sup> the correspondence is established precisely by their structuring. The hyperreal and the fractal infer the indiscriminate assembling of fragments whose value depends on their context (Baudrillard 1981, 66). An obvious example of translating the Deleuzeian fungal networks into the Baudrillardian digital cosmoi are the parallel worlds of the social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, where the same piece of information produces a plethora of different interpretations and realities.

Both hyperreality and the fractal subject are precipitated by the processes inherent in the functioning of the post-industrial phase of capitalism, most notably globalization and digitalization. The rapid development and expansion of the electronic media and their gradual digitalization facilitated the implosion of all media into a single communication channel, and hence obliteration of the very concept of a medium (Kittler 1987, 102). Within such a framework, the reality of our sense perceptions and the comprehension of our surroundings are conditioned by systems of digitally coded information which refer to nothing substantial but merely carry the potentiality of a message. Baudrillard's hyperreality refers precisely to the composites of such "miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control"

<sup>5</sup> Such is, for instance, the italicized third-person account of the Shelleys' and Byron's stay at Lake Geneva (Winterson 2019, 5), which resembles a passage from a biography or an encyclopaedia entry.

<sup>6</sup> The obvious examples are the oft-repeated lines from "Sonnet 53", or quotations from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which Ry refers to as "our [his and Victor's] book" (Winterson 2019, 215). In this case, the transtextuality is metafictional.

<sup>7</sup> On Deleuze and Guattari, see Vogrinc Javoršek (2018, 103).

<sup>8</sup> And, indeed, to the theoretical assessments of the latest paradigm shift regardless of their disciplinary provenance. Not only the two categories encompass the main tenets of the poststructuralist thought (cf. Krevle 2017, 123–24), they are also conceptually compatible with, for instance, Hayles' definition of the posthuman subject (1999, 3), Butler's notion of the performative nature of (gender) identity (1988, 519), and the fundamental premises of quantum physics (Krevle 2019, 92–93).

which, depending on their environment, may (re)produce countless versions of the real (1994, 2). In the hyperreal paradigm, the *real* is thus a potential constellation of (digitally encoded) data, which means that all realities exist at the same time as a potentiality. Their stability relies on the amount and compatibility of information involved: incoming data are verified with regard to their compatibility with the systems of information already assimilated into the constellation that we perceive as the reality of our quotidian existence. An example that succinctly embodies and reflects this principle is, for instance, the phenomenon of *fake news*, which can sometimes have very concrete consequences.<sup>9</sup> Due to the incessant inflow of new information from the environment, hyperreal realities are in constant flux; they are permeable, interconnectable and interchangeable: they are, namely, realities without the *outside*.

Similarly, Baudrillard's fractal subject is a "subject without other" (2011, 64), its status instigated by the shift of production relations indicating the beginning of the post-industrial phase of capitalism. Due to the unprecedented expansion of advertising after the Second World War, which, assisted by the fast-tracked development of media and information technologies, became the chief instrument of globalization, the representational function of the objects of consumption had steadily eclipsed their functional value to the point where they assumed the status of signs. Through the act of consumption, these "sign-objects" (Baudrillard 1981, 66) – these iPhones, Versace jeans and Billie Eilish LPs – are combined into dynamic networks of postmodern identities. Due to their equal coding and hence universality, the sign-objects constitute an all-embracing subject that is "fractal [...], both subdivisible to infinity and indivisible, closed on [it]self and doomed to endless identity" (Baudrillard 2011, 64). The postmodern subject is therefore a multiplicity of all the potential constellations of available sign-objects. Within the postmodern ontological framework, what we perceive as *I*, as our *self*, is the variant of our identity at the moment of perception. Moreover, since the totality of sign-objects is universally shared, meaning that individual sign-objects simultaneously participate in multiple systems of identity (of all those who purchased a certain product, like a Rolex watch, for instance), at each given moment, our identity is part of other identities, other *selves*.

### 3 Patchworks of *Frankissstein's* Realities

To move from theory back to Winterson's novel, let us first establish whether the seeming compliance of *Frankissstein's* narrative worlds with the fundamental metaphysical tenets of Postmodernity is not merely correlative but, in fact, ontological. I proceed on the assumption that the latter is the case if the structuring and functioning of the literary worlds in the novel correspond to the principles of the structuring and functioning of postmodern realities. Such a perspective entails that the stability – and hence *realisticness* – of the data constellations that make up *Frankissstein's* literary cosmos depends on their connectivity with *existing* ("experienced") hyperreal systems, as well as the hyperreal systems created by the (media in the) novel. Since the novel as a genre is also a postmodern medium, generating information that can potentially interfere with existing hyperreal constellations, there is no ontological difference between the *literary* or *non-literary* hyperreal systems.<sup>10</sup> Each new compatible piece

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<sup>9</sup> Among the more notorious instances of fake news is Pope Francis' endorsement of Donald Trump for US president, which saw some 960,000 Facebook engagements ("Fake News" 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the established categories of the *real* and the *fictional* conflate into the *hyperreal* and are thus – as a

of information in or from the book interferes with the existing hyperreal systems. Hence, the main features of such literary worlds are the permeability, connectivity and exchangeability of all the involved hyperreal constellations.

One of the more obvious features of the realities in the novel is their reliance on the media artefacts that have already become part of our collective memory and experience, and thus constitute a stable foundation for the verification of new information and creation of alternative hyperreal constellations. These comprise existing topographic and historical locations, as well as a comprehensive array of (pop)cultural and literary artefacts. Ry's story coincides with the late 2010s "meteoric" ascent of the transgender agendas and transgender visibility (Billard 2019, 165; Taylor, Haider-Markel, and Lewis 2018, 3–4). Victor and Ry meet while visiting the Alcor cryogenic facility headquarters in Scottsdale, Arizona, where they are guests of Max More.<sup>11</sup> Ron Lord ponders the opportunities Brexit offers for the expansion of his bot business, and worries that Claire is "a #MeToo type" (Winterson 2019, 230). The narrative's socio-political context is rendered, for instance, through jabs at President Donald Trump ("Is Donald Trump getting his brain frozen? asks Ron. Max explains that the brain has to be fully functioning at clinical death") and criticism of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro: "[W]here do you draw the line? Murdering bastards, child molesters, thugs, nutters, that bloke in Brazil – Bolsonaro" (2019, 227).

The stability of the worlds in Mary's part of the narrative relies primarily on the cultural, and especially literary, artefacts, that is, information on the life and times of Mary Shelley, and her novel *Frankenstein*: the text itself, its genesis, and its historical and cultural impact. The more one is acquainted with *Frankenstein* and its paratextual dimensions, the more one considers the worlds of Mary's narrative as a solid hyperreal basis for further development and consolidation of the Mary Shelley-related notions. The hyperreal constellation of the topographic and historical location of Lake Geneva in 1816 is enhanced and stabilized by manifold biographical, epistolary, encyclopaedic and academic accounts on the circumstances of the conception of *Frankenstein*. Similarly, the Bedlam asylum, where in Winterson's novel Victor is brought and where Mary eventually meets him, consolidates the credibility of Mary's account of the events. The topographic and historical system of data conditioning the prevailing notion of the infamous Bethlem Royal Hospital<sup>12</sup> is on the one hand upgraded by Winterson's verbatim quotation of the 1725 pamphlet advertising tours of the asylum premises (2019, 174).<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the veracity of the Bedlam-related events in the novel is also enhanced by the compatible information from *Frankenstein* (Victor Frankenstein's being committed to an insane asylum). Additional research of the relevance of the institution to Winterson's – and Mary Shelley's – story further reinforces Mary's reality constellation,

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fundamental literary dialectic – rendered obsolete. Consider, for instance, the world-wide controversy following the publication of Dan Brown's bestselling novel *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). The Vatican even appointed Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone as the official *The Da Vinci Code* debunker (Pauli 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Max More is a renowned futurist and transhumanist philosopher, who was the president and CEO of Alcor Life Extension Foundation between 2011–2020.

<sup>12</sup> Bedlam is the nickname for the oldest English hospital for mentally ill individuals.

<sup>13</sup> Since the citation is not marked as such, establishing that the text is, in fact, a verbatim quotation, requires further verification of this piece of information with regard to other constellations of data (i.e., an internet search). If one chooses to do so, the reliability of both Winterson's and Mary's account is additionally reinforced.

as one soon learns that Shelley's mother visited Bedlam when preparing her novel *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman* (1798). Seeking additional information on Mr. Wakefield, the psychologist who treats Victor Frankenstein in Winterson's novel, also enhances the veracity of the Bedlam-related events.<sup>14</sup> Bedlam is thus a stable topographic hyperreal system that can verify large amounts of potentially compatible data. It is so stable, in fact, that when it is mentioned again in Ry's story after Victor's disappearance (2019, 340), the reference – this time both topographic as well as metafictional (i.e., referring to Mary's narrative) – connects the two narrative planes and establishes the potentiality of Victor disappearing from Ry's to Mary's world. This, in turn, further enhances the stability and veracity of Mary's world.

Other cultural artefacts, be they literary or otherwise, function in a similar way. Their presence in the collective memory provides them with a high level of stability, while their circulation in the mediasphere assigns them the status of data that participate in the formation of alternative constellations. Quotations from *Frankenstein*, lines by Shakespeare, Percy Bysshe Shelley and others, the almost verbatim transcription of the Wikipedia entry on I.J. Good as well as of several paragraphs from Sebag-Montefiore's *Enigma: The Battle for the Code*,<sup>15</sup> etc., all unreferenced (but italicized), contribute significantly to the stability of the worlds in the novel. For instance, recognizing what Mary is reading to her husband Percy as actual paragraphs from *Frankenstein* increases the veracity of her literary reality. The metafictional impact of the quotation is perfectly compatible with both the reference to an 1803 book on galvanism<sup>16</sup> that appears a few pages earlier, and with the recurring opening lines of Shakespeare's "Sonnet 53" – together they form a stable foundation for the constellation of the literary worlds of Mary's narrative. When the lines of "Sonnet 53" reappear in Ry's narrative, they connect the two narrative planes and enhance their compatibility.

The novel's narratives also prominently feature topographic, historical and cultural loci that have no hyperreal referents and are therefore mediated by the novel. These novel-generated spaces are highly compatible with the systems of data that have already become part of our experiential "realities", which ensures their stability and veracity. For instance, Victor describes the location of his secret lab in Manchester as "[t]he tunnels and bunkers [...] built in the 1950s with money from NATO. [...] Down below there are generators, fuel tanks, food supplies, dormitories, even a local pub" (164). According to the available information there is indeed an underground network of tunnels under Manchester, which was last used by the military during the Second World War and only recently opened to the public. This corroborates the information on Victor's secret lab, and the veracity of the 1950s-looking pub next to the lab, where Ry's party waits for Victor to finish his experiment.

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<sup>14</sup> Edward Wakefield significantly contributed to the improvement of the inmate care in British mental institutions after 1815 by publishing reports on the dreadful conditions he observed in the Bethlem hospital during his 1814 and 1815 visits (Wikipedia 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Sebag-Montefiore's book is about the breaking of the German Enigma code (2004). The mathematician I.J. Good was a member of the team, led by Alan Turing, that deciphered the code.

<sup>16</sup> Galvani's *An Account of the late improvements in Galvanism with a series of curious and interesting experiments performed before the Commissioners of the French National Institute, and Repeated Lately in the Anatomical Theatres of London. To which is added an appendix, containing the author's experiments conducted on the body of a malefactor executed at Newgate* (Winterson 2019, 14).



Likewise, the potentiality of Mary's conversation with Byron's daughter Ada Lovelace at a party thrown by Charles Babbage is increased significantly by the compatibility of the event with the constellations that are already part of our hyperreality. Ada Lovelace was a mathematician who worked with Babbage on the development of a protocomputer called the Analytical Engine. She is also credited with writing the first computer algorithm. Thus, her discussion on an artificial mind with Mary, the author of *Frankenstein* and one of her father's friends, at Babbages' party may not have been verified (yet), but it is certainly not an impossibility. Similarly, the italicized accounts of the Shelleys' vacation at Lake Geneva in 1816 and of the events on the night of the famous ghost-story contest, the description of Shelley's burial, biographical data on Mary Wollstonecraft, etc. – although they have no exact hyperreal referents – function like the *bona fide* citations because they are coded in the same way. They are information generated by the medium of the novel, and their veracity depends on their connectivity with existing hyperreal constellations. If anything, these “fake quotations” somewhat cheekily celebrate the implosion of the real/fictional binary, and endorse the fundamental postmodern premise, namely, that hyperreality is a totality of equally coded data without an outside.

The obvious consequences of equal coding are permeability, connectivity and interchangeability of all the potential realities. The entanglement of Mary's, Ry's and the reader's worlds, as well as of the worlds on the transtextual plane, is therefore the necessary consequence of the same coding of those worlds, which allows them to connect at the points of their compatibility. The more such nodes, the denser is the entanglement of the realities involved, and the greater their stability. The paradigmatic instance of such connectivity and permeability of the worlds in the novel is Victor's seamless circulation in and among them. He first appears as a vision at the beginning of Mary's narrative, as “the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together” (Winterson 2019, 21). Winterson's description of the vision is a verbatim quotation from Shelley's preface to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* (1996, 172), and it is precisely the metafictional impact of the description that establishes Victor as the node that connects Shelley's and Winterson's (literary) worlds. Moreover, the name *Victor* binds the character with Percy Bysshe Shelley, who used it as a pseudonym in his early work (Bieri 2005, 39). Victor reappears in both roles – that of a scientist and that of the narrator's lover – in Ry's narrative, ensuring further entanglement of the worlds involved and hence their greater stability.<sup>17</sup> We encounter Victor next in Bedlam, where he is brought after following his Monster to the North Pole, and where Mary eventually meets him. The ubiquitous presence of Victor in the novel's worlds, the nature of his work in both Mary's and Ry's narratives and the dense network of (metafictional) references surrounding him at this point already combine to the degree where the stability of the system produces the effect of veracity for the reader. The *source* of Victor-related information – Mary's or Ry's accounts, the (pseudo) metafictional references, the dreams, the visions, internet searches, etc. – is trivial to this effect since all data are coded in the same way (language), mediated through the same channel, and thus qualitatively equal. They incorporate themselves into the hyperreal constellations of our postmodern quotidian according to the principles of permeability, connectivity and interchangeability, and produce the effect of realisticness.

<sup>17</sup> The connection between Mary's and Ry's worlds is made explicit upon Ry's and Victor's first encounter: “Have we met? And the strange, split-second other-world answer is *yes*. No, I say” (Winterson 2019, 107).

## 4 Patchworks of *Frankissstein's* Subject

By analogy with Baudrillard's concept of the postmodern subject, the postmodern *literary* subject is a dynamic multiplicity of potential constellations of sign-objects. Since equal coding is inherent in their status, any act of individuation (i.e., the integration of sign-objects into an identity) relies on a commonly-shared reservoir of these "personal characteristics". Consequently, there is no ontological difference between literary or any other identity – all potential identities in the fractal paradigm are comprised from qualitatively equal components and coded in the same way. Literary character creation is therefore paradigmatic of the formation of any self, which abolishes the divide between those who are real (non-literary), and those who are (literary) fiction, and creates the option of being both at the same time (like, for instance, our Facebook self and our non-virtual self).

The cast of *Frankissstein* is teeming with historical personalities and contemporary public figures, and one of the two main plots is even narrated by a prominent historical personage, Mary Shelley. In the course of her narrative we are privy to her dreams, visions, fears, regrets, opinions and moments of intimacy with her husband. With her, we endure the misogyny of Byron and the ruthless technicism of Polidori, puzzle over the quiriness of Claire Clairmont, cherish the brilliance of Ada Lovelace, and are in equal measure fascinated and appalled by the genius and the egotism of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Similarly, we are guided through the Bedlam subplot by the first-person account of Dr Wakefield. Since all the protagonists in Mary Shelley's narrative are well-known historical personages, we automatically assign the slightly less known Edward Wakefield the status of a real-life personality, or we established his existence or veracity through additional research. In his part of the narrative, we are introduced to Mary Shelley from his perspective, and, more importantly, to Victor Frankenstein, at which point the three protagonists – two historical personages and a famous literary character – inhabit the same ontological plane. Due to their status of cultural artefacts in contemporary societies, the three circulate the mediasphere as systems of data, each stable, but all highly interconnectable because of the same coding and the presence in common (*Frankenstein*-related) hyperreal systems.

Explicitly identified as a variant of Mary (Winterson 2019, 83), the narrator of the other plot, Ry, is simultaneously a literary and non-literary figure, in the sense that he is a character in Winterson's novel, and a facet of a historical "real" figure. The compatibility of his identity system with that of Mary's enhances his (non-literary) veracity, while his metafictional status imbues this veracity with literariness. When meeting Max More, he also shares the ontological plane with a real-life celebrity. As their meeting constructively contributes to the development of the story, Max More's identity, too, is simultaneously literary and non-literary. Perhaps the most telling example of the qualitative equivalency of the protagonists – historical, literary and otherwise – are the two "*Author's note[s]*." The one in Mary's narrative states that "THIS IS THE MOST PROFOUND THING CLAIRE HAS SAID IN HER LIFE" (2019, 133), and the one in Ry's claims "THIS IS THE MOST PROFOUND THING RON HAS EVER SAID" (2019, 226). Both comments enhance the validity of Claire's and Ron's statements, although there is no indication who the Author commenting on the statements may be: it could be Winterson, Mary, or Ry. Since in the fractal paradigm

they are all identity variants of the same subject, the Author may also comprise all of them. Winterson's constant relativization of the narrative roles and perspectives in the novel indeed seems to suggest just that: "I was my own disguise" (2019, 17), Mary asserts at the beginning of her narrative, referring to her childhood immersions into the characters and worlds of her own invention. The essentially composite nature of the authorial *I* is also proposed by her husband's comment "[W]hat if we are the story we invent?" (2019, 55), by Ry's wondering "Is [Victor] the teller? Am I the tale?" (2019, 189), and Victor's musing in Bedlam a few pages later "*I do not know if I am the teller or the tale*" (2019, 196).

Not only do these statements relativize the literary and non-literary status of the novel's protagonists, hence blurring the line between the traditional notions of real and fictional, they also imply the effects that the shift to the fractal paradigm has on the established categories of narrative agency. Because their structuring in the fractal paradigm relies on the common fund of signs for individuation, the traditional participants in the literary act (the author, narrator, character, reader) conflate into a dynamic and thoroughly permeable multiplicity of the literary subject. Within this multiplicity, the literary *character* is an identity variant of the *narrator* who is an identity variant of the *author* as inferred by and assimilated into the identity variant of the *reader*. In other words, within the framework of fractal literary subjectivity, each narrative agent is involved in the manifold identities that constitute that subject.

In *Frankissstein*, the merging of narrative agents is induced on the formal level by the absence of focalization markers. Because there are no punctuation marks that would delineate direct speech, mark a quotation or change of speaker – unless the speaker is directly named, which is rare – the agent of the narrative *I* is often impossible to establish.<sup>18</sup> Considering the reliance of this novel on Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the multiplication of the narrative *I*s, which blurs the distinctions between the traditional narrative agents, is hardly coincidental, as it evokes the serial first-person accounts in the framed narratives of Shelley's masterpiece. From that perspective, the effect of fractality and ensuing postmodern realisticness is ensured precisely by *Frankissstein*'s metafictional dimension.

The common ontological provenance of the narrative agents is also clearly exposed on the level of content. Not only do all the participants in the novel appear in various roles in relation to the narrative, they often occupy multiple positions of narrative agency at the same time. Mary Shelley, for instance, is simultaneously the narrator of her part of the story in *Frankissstein*, and the author of *Frankenstein*, whose genesis her story recounts and whose parts are quoted or referred to throughout Winterson's novel. Moreover, these references appoint Mary as the author of *Frankissstein* as well, thus rendering her ontologically indistinguishable from Winterson. Their shared authorial status is corroborated by the absence of quotation

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<sup>18</sup> For instance, one of the sections in the novel opens with the definition of the words "artificial" and "intelligence", followed directly by "Intelligence is chasing me but I'm beating it so far" (Winterson 2019, 143). Similarly, at the very end of the book, Mary is considering the possibility of reviving Shelley by means of the Analytical Engine, and gradually merging with Ry in the process:

I feed the punch-card into the machine and what comes out is Shelley.  
 Mary! He says.  
 (Victor! Is that you?)  
 I turn round. In the crowd. Over there. Is that him? (Winterson 2019, 344)

marks or any other (reliable) indication of referentiality, and made explicit in the first Author's note discussed above. Mary is also a character in Winterson's novel, and when she meets Victor in Bedlam her ontological status is one of a character in her own novel and a character in Winterson's book, which means that there is no qualitative difference between the metafictional and the non-metafictional dimension.<sup>19</sup> Metafictional elements thus have the same ontological status as other (systems of) media-generated data, which enables them to productively participate in the formation of identity. Mary also appears in the role of the reader and interpreter of *Frankenstein* (Winterson 2019, 140–41), of Coleridge's, Shelley's and Shakespeare's poetry, and a biography of and works by her mother.

Ry, too, performs – often simultaneously – a number of functions in the narrative. As a modernized version of Mary, he occupies the same positions in the narrative as she does. The entanglement of their identities, implicit in the metafictional invocations of Mary's narrative in Ry's story, is actually made explicit on the last page of the novel, where the two are revealed as a single trans-temporal and trans-spatial entity (Winterson 2019, 344). This, in turn, means that Ry's agency in his narrative also applies to Mary's in hers. In his plot, Ry takes on the function of the narrator of his story, of the character in his story and in Winterson's novel, and of the reader of *Frankenstein*. In the second Author's note (also discussed above), he also assumes the position of the author of both Winterson's novel and of his narrative. His narrative persona is therefore just as stable as Mary's or Winterson's, although he is technically a metafictional composite, like Shelley's Monster an entity composed from disparate, yet compatible parts.

Victor's identity is also inherently metafictional. All of his identity variants in the text are composites of transtextual and metafictional references to Shelley's novel and her biography. Nevertheless, like Mary and Ry, he occupies and combines several subject positions in the text. He is, most obviously, a character in Winterson's *Frankissstein*, where he inhabits multiple spatial and temporal narrative planes. He is a character in Ry's story, a character in the novel that Mary is writing and a character in Mary's story. When he is brought to Bedlam, his character is a multiplicity of three identity variants at once: that of a character in Mary Shelley's novel, a character in Mary's story and a character in Winterson's novel. His composite status is also acknowledged in the letter Dr Wakefield is writing to Mary after Victor's disappearance from Bedlam: "*Further to your visit, the man who calls himself Victor Frankenstein, a character in your excellent novel, has . . .*" (Winterson 2019, 305).<sup>20</sup> Victor also appears in the role of the author of the journal that Dr Wakefield is reading, and the narrator of the story conveyed in the journal. As the content of the journal corresponds to Victor's journal entries in *Frankenstein*, his authorial status is ontologically equal to Mary's, and hence to Ry's and Winterson's. Like Mary, he is the creator of the Monster, and as Mary's creation, he is, admittedly, the Monster as well: "[Mary] said, Those words are spoken not by Victor Frankenstein, but by his creature. [Frankenstein answered,] We are the same, the same" (2019, 215). Through this explicit

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<sup>19</sup> Another instance of Mary simultaneously occupying the roles of author, narrator and character in her and Winterson's novel is her vision of the Monster at the beginning of her narrative (2019, 5).

<sup>20</sup> The text is italicized in the original, which suggests the possible historical existence of the letter (especially since both Wakefield and Mary Shelley are historical personages) and hence of the actual historical existence of Victor. The implied metafictionality thus enhances the veracity of Victor's existence.

identification with the Monster, the ontological status of the Monster is revealed as identical to that of all the other narrative agents in Winterson's novel. Moreover, this qualitative sameness is established precisely because the structuring principle that conditions the ontology of the Monster is paradigmatic of Winterson's use of transtextual and metafictional elements as signs that combine into the patchworks of her creation.

As cultural and literary artefacts, the signs that make up the identity variants of the protagonists in Winterson's novel belong to the totality of signs that constitute the (potential) identities of the postmodern fractal subject. Through the act of reading, these signs and the (literary) identity variants they form are evaluated with regard to the systems of readers' identities. The stability and the ensuing veracity of the mediated (literary) constellations therefore depend on the readers' familiarity with *Frankenstein's* metacontexts, and on their respective systems of identity. This means that it is, in fact, the readers of the novel that establish the function(s) of and the relationships among the participants in the narrative act. The reader's agency is hence indistinguishable from the author's and the narrator's, as well as the characters', since in the fractal paradigm characters personify the variants of the authorial identity. The last conversation between Mary and Ada Lovelace, which prompts Victor's resurrection as a totality of his historical and literary incarnations at the very end of the novel, seems to suggest just that:

[I]f we could re-present ourselves in a language that the Analytical Engine could read, then it could read us.

Read us back to life? I said.

Why not? she said. (Winterson 2019, 344)

## 5 Conclusion

The proposition of being "read" back to life by the "Analytical Engine" conveniently aligns with the vantage point of this study – namely, the appraisal or assessment of the seeming compliance of the distinctly patchworked structuring of Winterson's 2019 novel *Frankissstein* with the fundamental metaphysical tenets of Postmodernity, i.e., the concepts of hyperreality and fractal subject. Implicit in Baudrillard's conceptualization of these categories is, in fact, the representation of everything in a language that Ada Lovelace's Analytical Engine – that is, a computer – *can* read. Namely, due to the processes of globalisation and digitalisation, the experiential horizon of postmodern individuals relies on digitally coded data, which combine into systems of perceived reality and identity. Equal coding of all data eradicates the concept of the medium (i.e., the notion of the *digital* as opposed to *non-digital*), and attributes the same ontological status to all the potential systems these data can create, be they the ongoing global pandemic or Winterson's *Frankissstein*. In the postmodern paradigm all realities and identities are completely permeable, interchangeable and interconnectable, which renders the concepts of the *outside* and *otherness* obsolete. In order to comply with the metaphysical premises of Postmodernity, the identities and realities in Winterson's novel should therefore be *read to life* (in the same way) as the people and events that shape our quotidian experience.

As a forthright homage to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Winterson's *Frankissstein* not only recreates the main protagonists and thematic concerns of Shelley's masterpiece, but does so

by employing Shelley's central topos of the Monster as the governing structural principle. The quintessential patchworkness of the Monster, literally actualized in the hybrid identities of the main protagonists, is most prominently at work in the dense network of transtextual and metafictional references. This is why in my assessment of the ontological status of *Frankissstein* special attention was paid to the role of the novel's transtextual and especially metafictional dimensions. Contrary to their traditional uses, in this novel transtextual and metafictional elements do not undermine the unity of the ontological order with their fundamental *otherness*; rather, they seem to productively participate in the creation of literary realities and literary subject. This is only possible if these elements are coded in the same way as the environment into which they are placed. Therefore, to function productively, transtextual and metafictional references should have the same ontological status as data (i.e., sign-objects) that participate in the formation of postmodern realities and identities.

The analysis of the novel's literary worlds presented here confirmed that the construction of reality in *Frankissstein* endorses the principles of hyperreality creation since in the process of reading literary worlds assemble as hyperreal constellations of mediated data. In this respect, transtextual and metafictional references exhibit the same properties and operate in the same way as other cultural artefacts, as well as existing topographic and historical *loci*. The ontological sameness of the data participating in the creation of the worlds in the novel is also evident in the distinct permeability, interchangeability and interconnectivity of these worlds, as well as in the homogeneity of literary and non-literary realities. The analysis of the novel's literary protagonists similarly determined that the identities actualized in the process of reading correspond to the fractal organisation of postmodern subjectivity. Namely, all the literary agents in *Frankissstein* are revealed as identity variants of a single subject, which assemble from compatible mediated data ("sign-objects") into thoroughly permeable, interchangeable and interconnectable systems. In this case as well, metafictional references seamlessly combine with evocations of historical personages and pop culture figures into narrative agents that defy classification according to both their role in the narrative and their ontological provenance.

The findings of the analysis suggest that Winterson's *Frankissstein* indeed complies with the metaphysical tenets of the present day socio-historical setting. The novel can therefore be considered an instance of a rather modest assembly of literary works that not only comment on the postmodern condition but are an intrinsic part of its ontology. The text's postmodern provenance is arguably the most acutely signalled by the radical shift in the function and impact of transtextuality and especially metafiction. Metafictional references in *Frankissstein* behave as Baudrillard's sign-objects, which means they are coded in the same way as other mediated data that participate in the creation of realities within the hyperreal paradigm. Metafiction is therefore no longer a device that would interfere with the concept of (literary) realism either in terms of its disqualification (cf. Jameson 2013, 6)<sup>21</sup> or dialectical confirmation (Holland 2020, 37, 56, 67; Slocombe 2010, 240–41). On the contrary, as

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<sup>21</sup> Jameson's dialectical explanation of realism maintains that realism relies on the disbanding of the old narrative modes which are inherent in it. Holland (2020, 51) observes that Jameson's definition essentially implies that "the new mode renders the older mode metafiction by rendering it visible and scrutable."

sign-objects, metafictional elements productively participate in the formation of realities and identities, and hence *precede* the real.

Winterson's *Frankissstein* thus – as behoves its fractal status – simultaneously conceives and reflects the cosmos, in which realities and individuals not only can be, but are, in fact, read to life. And in this dynamic multiplicity of infinite interpretations that we call our world, the answer to any query about the substance can only be: “you in every blessed shape we know” (Shakespeare 1993, 884; Winterson 2019, 15).

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