Ryszard W. Wolny / Zdzisław Wąsik (eds.)

Faces and Masks of Ugliness in Literary Narratives

The ugly depths: Outsides and insides in colonial discourse

Tadeusz Rachwał
Warsaw School of Social Sciences and Humanities
Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń

According to Sigmund Freud,[1] the ego "is first and foremost a body-ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but it is itself the projection of a surface". He then compares the ego to the "cortical homunculus' of the anatomists", (1927 [1923]: 31)[2] which is an image of a distorted human used in anatomy to describe the body within the brain. The distorted human body, perhaps an ugly one, takes part in the construction of the conscious as its bodily predecessor which, as if it were, constitutes a surface beneath the surface, a surface which emerges from the body as an idealized projection. The ego mediates between the depth of the unconscious and the ideally dematerialized consciousness of the super-ego, simultaneously remaining there as a link between the conscious and the unconscious.

This link is necessary, as otherwise there would be no possibility of mediation between the inexpressible unconscious and consciousness, between, broadly speaking, the orderly sphere of culture and the depth of uncontrolled desires. This depth can only be communicated through a surface, and the alleged ugliness of the homunculus of the ego is in fact a projection of the ugliness of depth, while depth, in itself, remains inaccessible to any immediate experience. Its ugliness is also a projection whose source is the projection of the ego.

Writing about projection as a crucial aspect of human creativity, Elaine Scarry notices a certain "discrete bodily location", which in fact questions the possibility of there being a depth without a surface: "the human being has an outside surface and an inside surface, and creating may be expressed as a reversing of these two bodily linings" (Scarry 1987 /1985/: 284). In Scarry's view, projection, which is inextricably linked with anthropomorfization, disables the possibility of an access to a world which is radically other, to the factually external world which is thus deprived of the "privilege of being inanimate" (1987: 285).

However ugly the lining of the world may be, its ugliness is a warning against going farther, or deeper, into an unclothed world, into the immediacy of

---

1   Born as Sigismund Schlomo Freud (1856–1939), an Austrian-Jewish neurologist; founder of psychoanalysis (editor's note: ZW).

2   See a respective figure at: http://spacecollective.org/folkert/1748/comment2159.

its nakedness that is held together by the two surfaces of human projections. Like Freud's ego, projection in fact separates us from the repulsive reality of the unconscious, it figures as a de-formed man (homunculus), whose shape still carries some resemblance to undistorted humanity, thus constituting a defensive layer of sorts, or a lining, beyond which there is nothing but the unpresentable itself.

Describing Frankenstein's creation, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1996) stops short of banning it beyond representation, beyond perception, and places its appearance in the liminal zone of being only "almost" unpresentable: "He approached; his countenance bespoke bitter anguish, combined with disdain and malignity, while its unearthly ugliness rendered it almost too horrible for human eyes" (Shelley 1996: 100). Commenting on this description, Denise Gigante writes that although many things have been said about Frankenstein's monster, "one thing cannot be denied: the creature is exceedingly ugly" (2000: 565).

Though the creature's ugliness is "unearthly", the world "almost" keeps the creature within the limits of human territory as available to human gaze and discourse. The ugliness of the creature evidently does not exceed the possibilities of human perception. Though "unearthly", Shelley's monster still seems to inhabit the earth, though away from the known and familiar world. The creature looks in the story like "a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island" (Shelley 1996: 96). This colonial excursion to undiscovered lands of ugly savages raises a more general question of the aesthetic facet of otherness which, in the case of *Frankenstein,* is also the question of otherness coming from within, from the cultural territory which has created the hideous progeny, and did not quite allow it to go forth and prosper.

The creature is hardly allowed to enter the inside of culture, although it is projected from the depth of the European tradition – from its, knowledge, pride, and ambition epitomized in the figure of Frankenstein. The monster initially dwells near various domestic spaces, lurks in the dark, and threatens them from the outside. Simultaneously, however, its origin is traced back to the inside of nature, to the depth of nature, which Frankenstein penetrates reading old alchemical treatises. This outside, however, is also a depth of sorts, a space of scientific and colonial exploration, a sphere still alien and potentially threatening to the seemingly secure position of the European culture.

In the novel, Karen Lynnea Piper notices, "'the 'birth' of the creature in Europe could be said to represent cultural fears of the invasion of the 'primitive' in 'civilized' society, or the arrival of the colonized, in search of revenge, on the shores of the colonizer" (2007: 63). Representing the creature as ugly, Mary Shelley (1996) inevitably awakens the long lasting European association of ugliness with moral inferiority, which, in the case of colonial discourse, also in-

volved the questions of race and ethnicity. As Noël Carroll notices, moral credentials of an ethic group "can be endorsed by means of an association with beauty", but such a group can also "be demeaned by being represented as … ugly" (2000: 38).

This mechanism of the aesthetic construction of the inferiority of, generally, non-Europeans was also at work in the discursive dealings with black slaves in America, following the opinion of Arthur Riss (2004: 257), who states that:

> Racial classifications were regularly translated into the hierarchical language of beauty and ugliness, and such standards of beauty were, in turn, considered as offering crucial information about the way in which the political and social sphere should be organized. As might be expected, Blacks were represented as the antithesis of the beauty of the Anglo-Saxon. Not only was the Negro consistently represented as ugly, but the race's intrinsic ugliness was commonly regarded as Nature's determinative proof of Negro inferiority

The question of ethnic and racial difference in Shelley's (1996) story takes a slightly different route. As Piper (2007: 63) convincingly suggests, the creature may well represent the inhabitants of the North – Greenlandic Inuits and Eskimos. The release of her novel coincided with the expedition searching for a Northwest Passage across northern America, and discussions of the "Esquimaux Indians", which, as Piper (2007: 63–64) writes,

> peppered the pages of books and journals ranging from the *Quarterly Review* to John Pinkerton's famous collection, *A General Collection of the Best and Most Interesting Voyages and Travels in all Parts of the World*.[3] Central to discussions of these Arctic inhabitants was the issue of appearance; lengthy anthropological-style essays were written by explorers such as James Cook on what an 'Eskimo' *looks like* and what differentiates an Eskimo from other Indians or indigenous peoples.

The discourse about the inhabitants of the North was "almost obsessive" (Piper 2007: 64), and Shelley's familiarity with it seems to be unquestionable. As far as contacts of England with other indigenous peoples increased, the already mentioned aesthetic, or "physiognomic hierarchy (connected to an ethical hierarchy) began to be established in England between indigenous peoples from different parts of the world" (Piper 2007: 64).

Mary Shelley (1996) positions the creature in a paradoxical space of exploration that is both surface and depth. Having been endowed with some features of Greenlandic people, the creature appears as natural, but the fact that Frankenstein composed it from the depths of graveyards and the deeply forgotten secrets of knowledge is also marked by Shelly in one of her descriptions in which the

---

3   The books of John Pinkerton (1758–1826) were published in 17 volumes between 1808 and 1814 (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme et al.) – editor's note: ZW.

creature as it were carries the depth on the surface: "His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes" (Shelley 1996: 98).

Piper (2007) gives quite a few examples of descriptions of Laplanders in the 18th and 19th centuries in which the blackness of hair and the yellowish complexion are repeatedly underlined. However, what is added to those elements are the muscles and arteries which are not fully covered by the creature's skin, thus making an impression of an unfinished surface. The inside of the creature's body invades the outside thus, along with the ethnic indigenous ugliness, translating it into what Denise Gigante (2000) reads, after Mark Cousins (1994, 1995) and Slavoj Žižek (1997) (cited in Gigante 2000), as a figure of excess: "Frankenstein's Creature is only *too* real. He is, like the blood and guts oozing from the fissures in his skin, an excess of existence, exceeding representation, and hence appearing to others as a chaotic spillage from his own representational shell" (Gigante 2000: 566).

As "too real", the creature transgresses the epistemological possibilities of communicating reality, of facing reality without a feeling of repulsion. Reality is always excessive and its ugliness puts in motion various means of its idealization, be it verbal or pictorial. The ugly precedes harmony and beauty, comes from its depth, and what Mary Shelley (1996) does in her text seems to be an attempt at cracking its surface. For Slavoj Žižek (1997: 21), as Gigante (2000: 67) quotes:

> contrary to the standard idealist argument that conceives ugliness as the defective mode of beauty, as its distortion, one should assert the *ontological primacy of ugliness*: it is beauty that is a kind of defense against the Ugly in its repulsive existence—or, rather, against existence *tout court*, since … what is ugly is ultimately the brutal fact of existence (of the real) as such.

Beauty is thus an always already projective category, a category without which we are left speechless. Hence, the inevitable violence of language and expression, which eliminate the excessive existence of the ugly, attempt to fully hide it underneath the skin of the well stitched and harmonious body. Shelley's creature cannot fully project himself and harmoniously develop into an aesthetic entity because it cannot reconstruct his historical past: "he gropes blindly for the source of his 'real' being" (Gigante 2000: 580).

Colonialism, and particularly ethnography and anthropology which are its ideological and epistemological tools, is in fact a way of shaping the world through various idealizations and projections for which the historical past of the colonized constitutes only a weak link between "us" and "them" – a link which does testify to some kind of affinity, though one in which the past is appropriated as ours. Facing the "primitive", the colonial gaze perceives the colonized as

an earlier version of the colonizer, thus inscribing the historical within its own domain.

Colonialism translates its others into history which is, in fact, a history of our own projections. Because of this paradox the colonial, or ethnographic, gaze makes up our own history, simultaneously translating the colonized into creatures without, or perhaps outside, history. Žižek's "ontological primacy of ugliness" is a blind spot in colonial discourse for which historicity constitutes the primary experience of being human. What Hayden White calls "politically domesticating effects of a historical attitude" (1987: 79) also posits history within the scope of colonial discourse in which domestication plays a crucial role. However, the colonial kind of domestication which, as in White's statement, is also inevitably political, translates domestication into a process of creation of a new human being which is removed from a prehistory into the proper history in which there is no place for subjects who, like Frankenstein's creature, have no historical past. This lack of historical past can be rhetorically rendered as ugliness resulting from the teratological[4] incompleteness whose monstrosity results from the closeness to the "bare bones" of a purely ontological being which, as yet, is not there – a being unmediated by any historical narrative.

A good example of such a vision of ugliness can be found in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, where the view from the boat is described as simultaneously incomprehensible and furious: "The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us – who could tell?" (Conrad 1996: 51) The complete lack of understanding of the black people is justified here by their "prehistoricity" which is associated with the inability to articulate any recognizable signs. Earlier, Marlow, the British character in the plot, removes the "prehistoric man" from the earth to a "prehistoric earth", an earth "that wore the aspect of an unknown planet" (Conrad 1996: 51). What is thus initially suggested is a complete separation between the colonial subject and the view that is exposed to his gaze. Then Marlow replaces the unknown planet with an earth which "seemed unearthly" (Conrad 1996: 51), and its unearthly character being associated with monstrosity. According to Conrad (1996: 51–52):

> The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there – there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly and the men were. … No they were not inhuman. Well, you know that was the worst of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces, but what thrilled you, was just the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of

---

4 Teratology studies monstrosities or abnormal formations in organisms (editor's note: ZW).

your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly
enough, but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in
you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim
suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you – you so remote from the night of
first ages – could comprehend.

The depth of Africa is a depth perceived here as monstrous and ugly. When
shackled and conquered, the monstrosity is still earthly. What makes this mon-
strosity intolerable is freedom which may well be read as freedom from lan-
guage and articulation; also as freedom from history. The ugliness of Mary Shel-
ley's (1996: 100) monster was also, as we have seen, unearthly ("its unearthly
ugliness rendered it almost too horrible for human eyes"), and it resulted from
the impossibility of articulating his history-based identity. In Conrad's text, the
(in)humanity of the Africans is not fully expressed, and the double negation he
uses ("they were not inhuman") plays a similar role as Shelley's "almost". What
is ugly in the above quotation is not only what Marlow sees but, more important-
ly, the very possibility of there being any kind of kinship between a man and the
Africans, the ugly thought of that possibility. Hence the demand of being "man
enough" to face it, of admitting that within a man there is something that cannot
be fully mastered and domesticated, something which is not yet fully conscious.
Though monstrous, it still promises some kind of comprehension. As in the case
of Freud's metaphor of homunculus seen as a projection of the unconscious, its
original depth, or rootedness, in the unconscious promises its full repression and
development to the state of controlled consciousness which will somehow chain,
or shackle, the monstrous and make it a part of the history of man.

Slavoj Žižek's ontological primacy of ugliness seems to be a slightly con-
tradictory concept because it posits ugliness beyond the processes of epistemo-
logical idealization. Ugliness is a significant, though negative, aspect of enforc-
ing the projective humanization of what seems to be ontological in itself. The
latter's ugliness is also a projection, or translation, into the categories of culture
within which, however ambivalently, it continually functions. Various kinds of
depths, in the wake of the modernist search for authenticity, have been envi-
sioned as spheres whose alleged ugliness can be fully projected onto the surface,
described a historicized, thus transforming the depth into an orderly space of the
promise of explanation. On top of the modern search for order beyond the dis-
figured and amorphous texts which are to reveal a universal harmony within,
there also come, for example, the deep and underlying structures of structuralist
linguistics, or the mythemes of structural anthropology. They all, I think, reflect
Shelley's/Conrad's dilemma of the possibility of identification with the mon-
strous and the ugly which is possible only when the colonial mindedness does

not give up its attempts at domesticating the other to the extent that this other, or rather that other, is reduced to a project which hides its projective strategies.

Ugliness seems to be a surface phenomenon which lacks any depth(s) and thus, as pure surface, necessitates an inside which itself is an explanatory projection of the true order of things. Depth is, like Freud's unconscious, a projection of the surface which endows it with the possibility of being ugly, though in the perspective of getting rid of the ugliness, of transforming it into something which does possess a depth which, when eventually revealed, will show itself as an ideal, unchangeable and systematic way of the world. In Conrad's text ugliness seems to be a projection of darkness, something that, again like Freud's unconscious which is in fact not-yet-conscious, is not-yet-visible, not-yet-articulated. Chinua Achebe's (1988 /1977/: 256) statement arguing that Conrad projects Africa simply as the antithesis of Europe is not quite adequate. Though European culture models itself on the idea of the Greek gods, the harmony of Apollo and the ugliness of Dionysus, lurks within it and surfaces in modernity.

As Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844–1900), a German philosopher of the late nineteenth century, noticed in *Human, All Too Human*, "the ugly side of the world, the side originally hostile to the senses, has now been conquered for music; its sphere of power especially in the domain of the sublime, dreadful and mysterious has therewith increased astonishingly" (Nietzsche 1986 [1878]: 100). Nietzsche's conquest of "the ugly side of the world" by music is not a colonial conquest as regards the insertion of European culture into the ugly primitive. On the contrary, it saves the ugly and inserts it into European art as a text which is an intellectual challenge. The text, in this case a musical one, no longer refers to the senses, but to the mind that will now seek meanings. As sublime, Nietzsche's modern music transcends the domain of the beautiful. Accordingly, Peter Uwe Hohendahl (2005: 191) notices, "[w]here older music emphasized the sensual, the new music underscores the abstract intellectual quality, which means that the listener has to focus on the meaning".

What is hinted at in Conrad's image of Africa, quoted above, is that the ugly "wild passionate uproar" whose noise is terribly frank can be responded to and comprehended. The scene may well be read as a spectacle of "primitive" dance and music which, though ugly, allegedly contains a meaning. This meaning is only suspected; its decipherment is a matter of a response that may either take the form an artistic expression, or that of anthropological explication. The modernist cult of primitivism, the fascination with Nietzsche's ugly side of the world, also brings forth the possibility that ugliness is in a way prior to beauty and meaning, to art and scientific investigation which both pursue a meaning, though in different ways. In the case of aesthetics, the priority of ugliness has been underlined by Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno who, in his *Aesthetic Theory,*

wrote: "If one originated in the other, it is beauty that originated in the ugly, and not the reverse" (Adorno 1997: 50, quoted after Hohendahl 2005: 185). Criticizing *Sacre du Printemps*, the work of Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971), which celebrates the cult of the primitive, Adorno accuses, the composer of abusing the primitive in, say, anthropological manner: "This [*Sacre du Printemps*] belongs to the years when wild men came to be called primitives" (Adorno 1973: 146, quoted after Hohendahl 2005: 175).

Anthropology, unlike art, interprets the primitive in terms of its own categories which reconstruct, by way of projection, our own, European anxieties and translates the activities of the natives into rites and rituals, thus bringing the incomprehensible into the sphere of universal praise of the sacred. The authentically artistic ugliness, on the other hand, supposedly reawakens the primitive within us, and opens up a perspective which disrupts historical past, thus going beyond the historically constructed ideas of beauty. However, ugliness, unlike simulacra, does not so much involve repetitiveness, as the alleged authenticity of meaning hidden beneath, or in the depth, of the seemingly incomprehensible frenzy of the ugly and the monstrous other.

References

Achebe, Chinua 1988 /1977/: An image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.[5] In: Robert Kimbrough (ed.) 1988: *Heart of Darkness: An Authoritative Text, Background and Sources, Criticism*. 3rd ed. London: W. W. Norton, (reprint) 251–262. /Massachusetts Review 18, 782–794./

Adorno, Theodor Wiesengrund 1973 [1949]: *Philosophy of Modern Music.* Trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster. New York: Seabury Press (Athlone Contemporary European Thinkers), [Philosophie der neuen Musik. Tübingen: Mohr].

Adorno, Theodor Wiesengrund 1997 [1970]: *Aesthetic Theory.* Trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press [Ästhetische Theorie. Frankfurth am Main: Suhrkamp].

Carroll, Noël 2000: Ethnicity, race, and monstrosity: The rhetoric of horror and humor. In: Peggy Zeglin Brand (ed.) 2000: *Beauty Matters*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Conrad, Joseph 1996 [1903]: *Heart of Darkness.* Boston: Bedford Books.

Cousins, Mark 1994: The Ugly (part 1). *AA Files* 28 (Princeton Architectural Press, New York), 61–64.

Cousins, Mark 1995: The Ugly (part 2). *AA Files* 29 (Princeton Architectural Press, New York), 3–6.

---

5   A Lecture given at the University of Massachusetts in 1975.

Freud, Sigmund 1927 [1923]: *The Ego and the ID*. Trans. Joan Riviere. London Hogarth: Press, 1927. [*Das Ich und das Es*. Leipzig, Wien, Zürich: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag].

Gigante, Denise 2000: Facing the ugly: The case of Frankenstein. *EHL* 67 (2), 565–587.

Hohendahl, Peter Uwe 2005: Aesthetic violence: The concept of the ugly in Adorno's asthetic theory. *Cultural Critique* 60, 170–196.

Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm 1986 [1878]: *Human, All Too Human*: A *Book for Free Spirits*. Trans. R. I. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1996 [Menschliches, Allzumenschliches, Ein Buch für freie Geister. Chemnitz: Verlag von Ernst Schmeitzner].

Piper, Karen Lynnea 2007: Inuit diasporas: Frankenstein and the Inuit in England. *Romanticism* 13 (1), 63–75.

Riss, Arthur 2004: The art of discrimination. *English Literary History* 71 (1), 201–287.

Scarry, Elaine 1987 /1985/: *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft 1996: *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus: The 1818 Version*. Eds. D. L. Macdonald, Kathleen Scherf. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press.

White, Hayden 1987: *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation.* The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore and London.

Žižek, Slavoj / F(riedrich) W(ilhelm) J(oseph) von Schelling 1997: *The Abyss of Freedom / Ages of the World*. An essay by Slavoj Žižek with the text of Schelling's *Die Weltaler* (second draft, 1813) in English translation by Judith Norman. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.[6]

---

6   Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775–1854), German idealist philosopher of nature and educator. For the source of information see: Schröter, Manfred 1946: Vorwort. In: F. W. 1946 /1811, 1813/: *Die Weltalter*. Fragmente. In den Urfassungen von 1811 und 1813 herausgegeben von Manfred Schröter. München, et al.: C. H. Beck, et al., VII–LVIII (editor's note: ZW).