



HAL
open science

Robert Walton, from Ulysses to Homer: The Act of Writing in Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus

Samia Ounoughi

► **To cite this version:**

Samia Ounoughi. Robert Walton, from Ulysses to Homer: The Act of Writing in Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus. *Frankenstein Galvanized*, 2012, 9781909086012. hal-01912628

HAL Id: hal-01912628

<https://hal.science/hal-01912628>

Submitted on 20 Nov 2018

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

ROBERT WALTON, FROM ULYSSES TO HOMER: THE ACT OF WRITING IN
FRANKENSTEIN OR THE MODERN PROMETHEUS

SAMIA OUNOUGHI AMU-LERMA (EA 853)

Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus does not start with the first chapter, nor does it end with the last. Robert Walton is the author of the preliminary letters of the book, the fourth of which contains the twenty-four chapters of the narrative. Many people know *Frankenstein*, even though not so many have read the book. Fewer people remember that Mary Shelley is its author, and even fewer know the name of Robert Walton. For the first critiques of Mary Shelley's text, Robert Walton's first person epistolary narrative is often considered a simple pre-text meant to introduce Frankenstein and his monstrous creature: *'a sort of introduction, which precedes the main story of the novel, and has nothing else to do with it'*. (*The British Critic*, 432-8).

During the thirteen-year gap between the two editions of her *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley brought changes to her text, but she never suppressed the four letters, nor erased the writer: Robert Walton. Walton is not the main character of the story, he is the essential character of the text, for he is the one that wrote the myth of the modern Prometheus. Indeed, he is the one that mirrors Mary Shelley and conveys the major question of literary creation, the process of writing. *'Everyone knows,'* Butor writes, *'that the novelist frames his characters, whether he wants it or not, whether he is aware of it or not, from elements of his own life'*. Walton is there to show the unavoidable gap between inspiration that occurs like a dream and its transcription in a narrative. Butor writes:

In many novels the narrator is a secondary character who witnesses and reports the unfolding of one or several hero(es)' tragedy or transfiguration. It is obvious that the hero then represents the author's dream, and the narrator what the author really is. The distinction between author and narrator in the book will mirror the distinction between the daily life he suffers, and this other existence he experiences thanks to the act of fiction writing. This very distinction is what he aims to render

perceptible, even painful to the reader. Beyond providing the reader with a soothing dream; he wants him to fathom the ever remaining distance between this dream and its actual transcription in words.'

When Lord Byron challenged his guests to write the best sensational story, Mary Shelley found herself facing two problems. First, inspiration: what story could she tell? The terrible weather conditions in Switzerland in the summer of 1816, her experience that gathered life and death through miscarriages and still-born babies, galvanism as a new trend in sciences; all these ingredients came together in the dream that inspired the story to her. The second and more important problem was how to write a good fiction that the readers would be thrilled by. This is precisely the question Walton faces. In analysing this first person narrator, I will discuss his writing process, for it reveals young Mary Shelley's reflection on what should be the right distance between the writer, the text and the reader.

Walton seeks glory in literature and first tries to become a writer, but he fails. When he unexpectedly inherits a decent fortune, he decides he will attain glory as a sailor. He starts an Odyssey, intending to find a sea route that leads to the North Pole. He reports this experience to his sister in the first three letters of the book. Later, Walton meets Victor Frankenstein and secretly writes the story his host confides to him on his death bed. The reader soon forgets Walton's presence and focuses on Victor Frankenstein and his adventure of creation. Consequently, literary reviewers have dedicated many articles to Frankenstein and his creature, the latter being analysed as the former's double. This corresponds to the twenty-four chapters enclosed in Letter 4. By analysing the book from the first page, I will demonstrate that Walton is the hub of all the relations of duality within the text, for he is the creator of this first person narrative. The second part will deal with Walton as a writer who prefers to remain invisible and hides behind the mask of a sailor. Why does Homer hide behind Ulysses? In the final part, I will show how the experience of writing transforms and redefines the writer.

Robert Walton: the origin of all the doubles

The most spectacular figure of the double in *Frankenstein* is of course the relationship between Victor and his creature. Yet, there are many more doubles in Mary Shelley's text like Robert Walton or Henry Clerval. Walton sees a mirror of himself in Frankenstein. Both are immensely self-centred and want to be remembered as historical icons for their great achievements. Victor also profusely speaks of his childhood friend Henry Clerval. They are an inseparable pair of very imaginative characters who both love studying. They are a second pair of doubles. These are only some examples of the characters that can be identified as Victor's mirror images. While they appear as Victor's doubles, other pairs of doubles in the book do not involve Victor at all. Those characters sometimes do not even know each other. For instance, Henry Clerval's traits reflect Walton's more than Frankenstein's. Both of them love reading; they want to achieve a literary creation and disobey their father to fulfil their duty. Not only do Walton and Clerval have common interests, but their common tastes and plans are sometimes totally opposed to Frankenstein's, especially when it comes to literature. Walton claims that Victor is the perfect friend he has always sought. Yet, the description he makes of this friend matches Henry Clerval more than Victor Frankenstein.

I desire the company of a man who could sympathize with me, whose eyes would reply to mine. You may deem me romantic, my dear sister, but I bitterly feel the want of a friend. I have no one near me, gentle yet courageous, possessed of a cultivated as well as of a capacious mind, whose tastes are like my own, to approve or amend my plans. How would such a friend repair the faults of your poor brother! (29)

Reading and writing literature is the dream of both Walton and Clerval. Frankenstein is different. He claims that he has no interest in literature. He neither reads fiction, nor intends to write any book or poem. Frankenstein does not take part in one of the major issues raised by Mary Shelley: how does one become a talented writer?

The similarities between Walton and Clerval give the illusion that they are levelled, doubles among doubles within the book. These echoes erase

Walton's essential role in the construction and control of the narrative speech. Yet, Walton is the narrator of the first plot, while Clerval is a secondary character of the second plot (Frankenstein's story). Because the origin of a first person narrative *'lies in the autobiographical enunciative structure, the characters of [such a] narrative cannot be apprehended but through a permanent relationship with the first person narrator. This does not mean they need to be personally acquainted, but only that they are seen through his eyes and his eyes exclusively.* (Hamburger: 274-275).

Discreet as he may be, Robert Walton is the creator of the narrative. Walton is the original character and all the others are his doubles. They are all projections of his perception. At first, Walton wrote exclusively to describe his petty experiences but they contrasted with his exacerbated feelings, which led to mediocre literary quality. By writing another's narrative, he has understood that it was not his person he needs to picture in his text. This major change defines him as an artist. Walton now organises his text differently. He conceals his presence and in his vision of the world, he thrusts Frankenstein to the stage front. He consequently appears as a character of lower importance than Henry Clerval, who is a secondary character. No surprise that most readers do not perceive Walton's seminal role and implication in the narrative. Indeed, Clerval is introduced in 'Chapter 2' and then we meet him again in six other chapters (chapters 3; 5; 6; 7; 18; 19). Victor mentions him again with emotion in the last two chapters. Eventually, he appears again in the epilogue *'Walton in Continuation'*. By contrast, Walton appears nowhere in the twenty-four chapters of the narrative he writes while his huge ego occupied the whole space of his letters. He brutally hands his romantic narcissism over to Victor Frankenstein. As the source of the text, Walton phrases the narrative so as to fade away behind Frankenstein, the subject of his composition. Walton appears as a character that is even less significant than the secondary characters around Victor Frankenstein. Henceforth, all the protagonists are presented as distant echoes of the great Victor Frankenstein, author of the fantastic creature which reveals his monstrous creator. Here lies the main interest, the sensational aspect of the plot. This does not mean Walton has ceased to express himself, but he does it by using Frankenstein's story as a metaphor of his own experience as a writer. His method echoes Mary Shelley's conception of art and literature.

Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself. ()*

Frankenstein is Walton's double as he creates a composite being using already existing material. Both the creation process and the creature's structure appear as an exact replica of Robert Walton's text. Walton uses narratives told by another to compose his own version of the myth of the modern Prometheus. Walton has found a subject to write about while expressing himself without appearing to do so. Though he introduces himself as a sailor, he leaves many traces in his text proving that his need to write has never left him.

Walton's will to write is superior to his will of exploration

Walton would like to be remembered as a historical icon and his plan to discover a sea route to the North Pole is not his first attempt to reach glory. When he was still very young, he discovered the works of Homer and Shakespeare and he then put his quill to paper with the aim to equal them.

I also became a poet, and for one year lived in a Paradise of my own creation; I imagined that I also might obtain a niche in the temple where the names of Homer and Shakespeare are consecrated. You are well acquainted with my failure, and how heavily I bore the disappointment. (26).

With Walton's naive confession of such self-conceit, Mary Shelley ridicules the narcissistic romantic writer. Walton's ambition to write great literature remains, and it is much more intense than his will to explore the planet. He suffered an unprecedented failure in his endeavour to be praised as a writer. Walton shall conceal his will to write a great novel under the mask of Ulysses.

Even before his departure, Walton gives away his lack of motivation to

lead the career of a mariner. In his second letter to his sister, the portrait he depicts of his lieutenant makes it obvious that he hired him not only to be his deputy but to act as captain. Robert Walton wants glory but he has no qualms about avoiding responsibility and he is happy to quote his inadequacy.

A youth passed in solitude, my best years spent under your gentle and feminine fosterage, has so refined the groundwork of my character that I cannot overcome an intense distaste to the usual brutality exercised on board ship: I have never believed it to be necessary; and when I heard of a mariner equally noted for his kindliness of heart and the respect and obedience paid to him by his crew, I felt myself peculiarly fortunate in being able to secure his services.

Through his romantic flight of lyricism in Letter 1 Walton means to express his happiness to explore the Great North, but when he is writing this, the exploration has not even started and it will never take place. His words do not depict an experience but the delusions he derives from writing. The romantic style of his journal conveys his taste for *belles lettres* rather than his happiness to be a sailor.

Letter 4, in which he meets Victor Frankenstein, reveals Walton as a petty captain. While the crew are talking with Victor, Walton ignores what is going on, the only event that occurs during his voyage. In fact, as this seminal encounter is taking place, Robert Walton is sleeping and his crew do not even bother reporting it to him: *'In the morning, however, as soon as it was light, I went upon deck and found all the sailors busy on one side of the vessel, apparently talking to someone in the sea.'* (33). Walton despises the profession of mariner, which to him, cannot lead to glory: *'My lieutenant, for instance, is a man of wonderful courage and enterprise; he is madly desirous of glory: or rather, to word my phrase more characteristically, of advancement in his profession.'*(30) This quote also shows how much the choice of words is important to Walton who is more busy writing literature than completing his captain's tasks.

The only stages of the voyage that Walton describes are his departure and his abandonment of his journey to the North Pole. The rest of his

narrative can be summed up as a long wait in the immobility of the ice. Walton's sole initiative is to rewrite the myth of Prometheus in the language of Shakespeare. He does not bother relating the rest of the voyage.

Beyond a simple journal, these letters are, therefore, the result of a writing exercise that Walton keeps practicing even when he has nothing to report. He accounts for the brevity of Letter 3 by his numerous activities while in fact, he is doing nothing.

I write a few lines in a haste, to say that I am safe and well advanced on my voyage. No incidents have hitherto befallen us that would make a figure in a letter. One or two stiff gales and the springing of a leak, are accidents which experienced navigators scarcely remember to record; and I shall be well content if nothing worse happen to us during our voyage.
(32)

The text on this page is nothing but a narrative void and it echoes the whole of Walton's journal and his journey into the icy abyss. His first text is a letter dated December 11th and his last text is dated September 12th. The last two numbers of the year are omitted so one cannot tell how many years it took Walton to write this story. If we assume that Walton's texts are included in one year, it means it took Walton nine months to achieve his work (the time of a human gestation). During these months, Robert Walton wrote only on eighteen days, seven of which were dedicated to the writing of the twenty-four chapters of Frankenstein's story. Out of the eleven remaining days, Walton reports little and only what he observes on and out of the ship since he left Archangel, the final stop of all the sea routes commonly used. It is the point beyond which his exploration should begin. Walton's adventure as a sailor is therefore mainly a great narrative void. However, with his meeting Frankenstein, Walton has eventually found a topic worth putting his quill to paper, but the spectre of his failure still threatens his plans. As a writer, he needs to find the right distance between himself and his text on the one hand, and between himself and the reader on the other. To find out how the writer proceeds we need to examine the status Walton gives to the 'I' throughout the book.

Walton does not confess that he took part in the composition of the narrative

Walton's attitude to his text is paradoxical. While he refuses to admit that he is in no way responsible for what he writes, he leaves traces of his participation in the composition of the text. Before reporting facts, Walton promotes the aesthetics of the text his readers are about to discover. Like an Ancient Greek myth teller, Walton refers to Frankenstein as the muse who will inspire in him the most beautiful of tales. The beauty of the text is superior in importance to its contents. Walton presents his text as any fiction meant to entertain the reader whose reception he anticipates: *'This manuscript will doubtless afford you the greatest pleasure'* (38). The manuscript is the result of an initiative by Walton alone. His comments on the text he has not yet written bring forward his writer's concern with the reception of his text; that's why he insists it is not his text. *'Strange and harrowing must be his story'* (38).

Frankenstein discovers that Walton has been writing his tale only once it has been completed: *'Frankenstein discovered that I made notes concerning his story'* (217). Before the first chapter, Walton also explains the way he will proceed to compose his text. *'I have resolved every night, when I cannot imperatively occupied by my duties, to record, as nearly as possible in his own words, what he has related during the day. If I should be engaged, I will at least make notes.'* (38) Walton pretends his participation is limited to that of a secretary but Walton never writes while Frankenstein is speaking. One wonders how he memorizes the story and how he finds the time to write these twenty-four chapters, for writing takes longer than speaking. As Walton presents it, his task is an impossible ordeal. He intends to make notes in case he lacks time to write everything. Yet, the text the reader discovers holds no trace of notes; on the contrary, it is very much detailed. This proves Walton indeed participated in the composition of the narrative, much more than he is willing to admit.

Walton makes sure that the reader does not identify him as the author of the text. Before he starts Chapter 1, Walton the sailor is again Walton

the writer and claims that he will hold his quill until the end of the tale he is about to hear. Then, he changes pages, writes 'Chapter I' and starts writing the story of Frankenstein. From then on, the reader perceives this 'I' as Frankenstein and not as Robert Walton even if the latter wrote it. In their article *'Rustling voices in speech: dialogism and reported speech'* Bres and Verine explain that in reported speech, there is only one speaker, the one who reports the speech since the original speaker is absent when the speech is being reported. It is Walton's words that we read, and not Frankenstein's.

Hence, in Chapter 2, when the creature's story begins with a third 'I', it seems to the reader that Frankenstein lends his voice to the creature. In reality, it is Walton who lends his 'I' once more to a character of the story. By these successive distributions of his voice, Walton renders his presence less and less distinguishable. He takes one step further into Frankenstein's shadow when the creature's story begins. While he had clearly shown the transition of his 'I' to Frankenstein in the structure of the text, this time, the transmission of the 'I' to the creature occurs without any structural change in the organisation of the narrative. The creature's story is embedded in the continuation of the preceding chapters. Walton has ceased to report the occasions when Frankenstein addresses him. Consequently, he has become silent, invisible.

At the end of the creature's story in Chapter 17, the 'I' refers to Frankenstein once more. Again, Walton does not intervene so that we get the impression that it is Victor who has lent his voice to the creature. In fact this 'I' never ceases to be Walton's throughout the book. Beneath the process of character duplication, which is usually analysed as the duality between the creature and Frankenstein, there lies the duality between author and narrators, the origin of all these mirror relationships being Robert Walton alone. Walton is the creator and the text is his creation. The text, just like the creature who is composite, is made up of all the different stories Walton tells about himself and those others tell him, and to which he adds some of his own imagination to allow them to hold together in a narrative. Walton's 'I' changes voices five times. In the letters 'I' refers to Walton. In the chapters, the 'I' initially

assumes the voice of Victor Frankenstein, later the creature and then Frankenstein again.

Finally, Walton returns to his own voice in the epilogue, 'Walton in Continuation'. The duplication process between Victor Frankenstein and his creature is a minor process considering that in Walton's case, it is not only a character-duplication but a character-multiplication. Only is Frankenstein's experience rendered more sensational by the romantic style that exacerbates his presence.

By using his 'I' in turn to convey Victor's and the creature's voices, Walton increases the distance between himself and the reader. But, if we look at the organisation of the text, we realise that Walton and his text are one. The first three letters he signs but leaves the fourth unsigned. He changes pages and writes 'Chapter 1'. Walton has thus transformed the epistolary genre of his text into a novel. Starting with a letter that is supposed to convey facts, he gradually drifts to fiction writing. At the end of the last chapter, Walton does not start a new page but writes '*Walton in Continuation*'. Again, his text is addressed to his sister as a letter. This time however, the status of the letter has changed. Letter 4 was the container of the novel but now the novel has become the container of the letter. Thus Walton has several times transformed the genre, the nature of the text itself. Walton was a character out of the plot and in '*Walton in Continuation*'; he is now the main character of this plot. He has been absorbed by the story he has been writing. Frankenstein's gradual isolation and physical changes during the process of creation echo Walton's experience as the story writer.

Totally absorbed by his text, Walton never signs Letter 4 as opposed to the first three letters. In certain editions of *Frankenstein*, the end of the book reads 'THE END', the end of a novel that had begun by a letter. The process of creation transforms the creator, and literary creation consists in using what already existed but gradually transforming it to create a new genre. The novel *Frankenstein* is a hybrid. Walton eventually enters into the narrative of the novel he is writing. He ceases to be the detached writer and becomes a character in the world of fiction that he has helped create. Yet, he cannot escape his responsibilities so easily because no matter how much he is involved in the plot as a character, his presence as a writer cannot be erased. Just like Mary Shelley in real life,

Robert Walton is seldom remembered as the creator of the text. Beyond her well-known sensational story, through *'Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus'* she gives her own definition of the construction and place of the writer. History has proved her right.

Work cited and further reading

Numbered references that do not quote an author refer to

Shelley, Mary. *'Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus'*, 1818 text.

This edition, *'Frankenstein Galvanized'*, Red Rattle Books, 2012.

Authier-Revuz, Jacqueline. *'Pour l'agrégation : Repères dans le champ du discours rapporté'* (suite) in *information grammaticale*, n°56, Paris, janvier 1993

Banfield, Ann. *'Unspeakable Sentences. Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction.'* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982.

Bres, Jacques, Verine, Bertrand. *'Le bruissement des voix dans le discours: dialogisme et discours rapporté'*, in *'Faits de langues, le discours rapporté.'* Paris: Ophrys, 2002 (pp. 159-169).

British Critic, The. *'Review of Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus'* 1818.

London. n.s.9. April 1818 <http://www.rc.umd.edu/reference/chronologies/mschronology/reviews/bcrev.html>

Butor, Michel. *Répertoire II*. Paris: *'Les Éditions de Minuit'*, 1964.

Hamburger, Kate. *'Die Logik der Dichtung.'* Cacliot, Pierre.[trad]. *'Logique des genres littéraires.'* Paris : Seuil, 1986.

Kerbrat, Marie-Claire. *'Leçon sur Mary Shelley.'* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997.

Patron, Sylvie. *'Le narrateur, introduction à La théorie narrative.'* Paris: Arman Colin, 2009.

*All asterisked quotes refer to text specific to the 1831 edition which is available in various formats.