The Exercise of Power and Responsibility

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On *Frankenstein* by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

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In *Frankenstein*, the exploration of power is played out on four different narrative-levels. First, the letters from the seafarer Robert Walton to his sister Margaret Walton Saville form the outer-frame for its particular story as well as for the other narratives. Second, the scientist Victor Frankenstein's telling of his version of the story of the history of his creation, abandonment, and death-struggle with the Creature. Third, the incorporation of the Creature's version of his abandonment, his desperate loneliness, and his transformation from goodness to evil as he mirrors his creator's values. And fourth, the Felix-Safie tale of heroism, injustice and love told within the Creature's story. To this, one might add a larger outer-frame: the unknown reader, escorted through Dantecian circles of terror and pity, led on by the seductive attraction of reading letters addressed to someone else.

The interconnection of the levels by the delivery of the stories mirrors the likeness of the stories themselves: Walton, in his ambition to discover a new polar route, fantasizes about 'the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind to the last generation' (vol. 1, p. 4), thus acting out an applied, secular exploration, while Frankenstein's quest for the secret of life is on a metaphysical and theoretical scale. In the end, it is Walton who changes, placing the wishes of the community (the sailors on his ship) above his own ambitions. Felix's story is a series of injustices: a foreigner unjustly persecuted, a hero who saves him stripped of possessions and exiled, the foreigner in turn breaking his promise to allow Felix to marry his daughter, Safie. Although Safie defies her father by taking her jewels and joining her beloved, this tale ends in the injustice of Felix himself. When he sees the Creature, who has been secretly bringing food and firewood to the cottagers, rather than ask his story, as Felix's blind father does, he brutally attacks him, thus showing he, too, is a victim and promoter of the socio-political power structure. Moreover, the very form of the novel, story within story within story, iterates human interdependency, however accidental or unrecognized.

As in Dante's or Milton's epics which she drew on, the multiple layers of *Frankenstein* present a variety of visions but, unlike epic form, Mary Shelley presents no stable, reliable narrator. Instead, it is constantly left to the reader to evaluate the validity of a character's words and actions. In the end, we are given Frankenstein's loving father who nevertheless fails to properly educate his son; his mother who, in accordance with the social norms, abdicates all responsibility for the education of her son; Elizabeth, Frankenstein's fiancée, who also adheres to the social norms though she does undergo a change in which she loses first her faith in the justice system, and then her life, victimized directly and indirectly by Frankenstein's code; Clerval, a poet, murdered because of his best friend, Justine, a servant, forced to confess to a murder she didn't commit and then hanged for it; Frankenstein himself, a wealthy, indulged young man whose cognition of the norms of his society leads him to want, like a monarch or a God, absolute power and, whatever his disastrous experience, incapable of understanding his inherent error and accountability; and a very unheroic appearing Creature who goes from a state of natural goodness to one of crime and transgression, but fully understands and assumes responsibility for the horrors of his deeds, though incapable of restraining himself.

By subtitling her story 'The Modern Prometheus', Mary Shelley configures her story in the shadow of Prometheus' act of bringing light to humankind, concretizing the issue through examples of educational practices and their failure throughout the novel. But, in her purposive transformation of the older myth of enlightenment, with its expected benefit to humanity, she has created a new and dangerous story that challenges the rationale behind Victor Frankenstein's quest and his intended 'gift'. In the Prometheus myth, the result of his actions, like Christ's, is redemptive suffering for humanity. Frankenstein's quest conversely reveals itself to be more for the attainment of personal, god-like power than for societal advancement. In this reversal of expectation, Frankenstein becomes the first of a number of unheroic male central figures in Mary Shelley's fiction. A failed Prometheus, he suffers not for humankind, but for his own unprincipled judgment, and not willingly. This modern Prometheus, then, reduces the 'heroic' act to a mocking parody of enlightenment intention and execution.

The personification of that parody is the Creature, a Rousseauian natural savage who evolves from a condition of instinctual goodness to learned evil, mirroring a society based on fear, and more a bona fide member of that society than he ever realizes. Systems based on power are imbued with a fundamental
expectation of danger and attack, which leads to a prevalent fear of the 'other'. The Creature, as constructed by Mary Shelley, is the living metaphor of that 'other', and as such expresses the position of any 'outsider' to the established authority. As the Creature educates himself first through contact with nature, then with Milton, Plutarch, Volney, and Goethe, and language itself, he is an argument for enlightenment theory as propounded by Godwin, Wollstonecraft, and the Shelleys. His innocence is destroyed by emulating the value system of power prevalent in the nineteenth century, the system perpetuated by his creator.

_Frankenstein_, then, may be seen as a republican form of the Prometheus myth. Power, in this telling, is in the hands of mortals who also have the capability of bringing light to civilization. The issue in _Frankenstein_ is not, as in traditional religious arguments, a lesson in the dangers of the usurpation of God's domain. Rather, consistent with Mary Shelley's reformist ideology, the novel proposes that when either a Prometheus or a Frankenstein usurps power, it could be for good or evil. In questioning the very idea of power as an instrument of God, it suggests that unjust social conditions can be interpreted not as the work of God but rather of humanity itself, and therefore subject to change. Contemporary religious traditionalists were certainly aware of this implication, and a number of the reviews expressly addressed the issue. Suspicious of this Godwinian novel, they asserted that _Frankenstein_ was a lesson in the dangers of attempting to usurp God's power or noted, within the same context, that it bordered on blasphemy (see vol. 1, introductory note).

Traditionalists have also applied the same conservative reading to the instruments of that implied usurpation: science and technology. But this obvious conclusion is inconsistent with the overall philosophy that informs _Frankenstein_, Mary Shelley's other works, and her comments in letters. It was science, from Copernicus and Galileo, incorporated into the theories of Newton, that shifted the understanding of the universe from a blend of the natural and supernatural, to the mechanistic vision that is at the very centre of enlightenment philosophy. If objects no longer have the essence of God in them, then any shape or essence is possible, and the search for that essence becomes a mechanism towards the creation of self-definition, individually and communally.

Both Shelleys saw scientific experimentation as a parallel with political experimentation: both offered the means to create a better world. Science was a major enthusiasm in England at the time, and P. B. Shelley's own strong interest in science1 may have induced Mary Shelley, during the writing of _Frankenstein_, to read in the works of Sir Humphry Davy, a pioneer of galvanic electricity.2 As the 1818 and 1831 introductions attest, P. B. Shelley's conversations with Lord Byron brought the evolutionary theories of Erasmus Darwin to Mary Shelley's attention.3 But the theories of Darwin and Davy may have been familiar to her much earlier: both men were Godwin's friends4. Furthermore, it is possible that Mary Shelley may have had some tutelage in science generally through some of Godwin's many conversations with his admired friend William Nicholson, whom Godwin 'turned to for information on the latest theories in chemistry, physics, optics, biology, and other natural sciences'.5 Rather than to be resisted, then, scientific exploration represented for Mary Shelley a ready contemporary paradigm for examining contemporary political inequities.

In this context, Frankenstein's limitation is not that he enters sacred realms but that he fails to take responsibility for his own actions. Akin to P. B. Shelley's _Alastor_ (1816), who also delves in 'charnels and coffins' (I. 24)6 and perishes a victim of self-centredness, Frankenstein fails to reach beyond himself. This defect is recognized by the Creature when he draws on his reading of Paradise Lost in comparing himself to Satan who wanted power for himself. The Creature's plea is one of many calls, unheard, to awaken Frankenstein: 'I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed [ ] I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy and I shall again be virtuous.'7

But Frankenstein remains locked in his insular world, and the furies that beset this failed Prometheus are not suffered by him alone. His actions destroy the larger community, including his young brother William, Justine, Elizabeth, and Clerval. Frankenstein's failure, then, is a parable for the failure of the nineteenth-century socio-political structure to take responsibility material and spiritual for the greater populace. The novel iterates the Godwinian concept that a corrupt system will taint or destroy all its inhabitants, expressed in _Political Justice_, and then fictionalized in his novel _Caleb Williams_. _Frankenstein_ resurrects these eighteenth-century societal theories in a model that offers its nineteenth-century audience, now shifted from revolutionary war to revolutionary commerce, the possibility of making responsible choices. Frankenstein's choice in assembling and then responding to the Creature serves as a paradigm for individuals and societies as they newly assemble their society of their own 'component parts'. This is the
connotation of the novel's epigraph, which raises the question of responsibility of both the creator and created:

Did I request thee, Maker, from my day
To mould me man? Did I solicit thee
From darkness to promote me?

(Paradise Lost, X. 743 5)

The characters of Frankenstein and the Creature, as well as their relationship, bring into question what and how we see; how we are conditioned to see; and, not least of all, how we create. The novel shifts the role of the artist-creator, Frankenstein's as well as Mary Shelley's, from observer and commentator, to shaper. Frankenstein, through its author, interpolates the woman as the creator, who comments on a failed sociopolitical system engineered and controlled by men. It also aligns her with visionary political reformers among them, her parents and P. B. Shelley who embraced the enlightenment belief in the potential improvement of humanity.

Notes

1. See, for example, Mary Shelley's manuscript that recounts Shelley's boyhood experiments with science, including 'a galvanic battery' and the 'charnel house' (Bodleian Library, MS. Shelley, adds. c. 5, f. 116); PBSL, I, pp. 227, 303.
5. St Clair, Godwin, p. 61; see note p. xvi, n. 6 above.
6. As Shelley actually had as a boy. See n. 1 above.

Citation Information