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Commingling Mythologies, Modern Metamorphoses, and a Case for Social Sympathy in Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*

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The characters in Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818) are complex – and sometimes contradictory – composites of a myriad of mythical, biblical, and literary figures. Victor Frankenstein, for example, is a clever amalgam of the fire-stealing Prometheus, the overreaching Icarus, Lord Byron's ambitious and world-weary Manfred, William Godwin's fatally curious Caleb Williams, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's storytelling mariner, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's pride-filled Faust, the biblical Creator, the Miltonic Satan, and the knowledge-craving Eve. Similarly, Frankenstein's monster is a sophisticated synthesis of the cursed Cain, the rebellious Prometheus, the Rousseauvian 'solitary walker',¹ Shakespeare's firewood-fetching and sympathy-starved Caliban and his morally-conflicted Macbeth, Goethe's suicide-seeking Werther, Milton's innocent Adam *and* his vengeful and defiant Satan, and Mary Wollstonecraft's self-educated and nature-loving heroine, Mary. Yet these intricate fictional creations are also uniquely Shelley's own, for she recasts these mythic, biblical, and literary figures in a new and revolutionary light, using them to interrogate contemporary concerns, criticize the unjust system of 'things as they are' – to quote the title of her radical and anarchical father Godwin's novel – and to show how things might change.

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (New York: New York University Press, 1979).

The key to such change, Shelley suggests, is the operation of a Smithian-inspired social sympathy. Although the characters within the fictional frame fail to sympathize with Shelley's protean creature, the reader – guided by Shelley's affective aesthetics – may. In fact, like the blind and beneficent old man De Lacey – who 'cannot judge of [the creature's] countenance' but deciphers 'something in [his] words that persuades [him]' of the creature's 'sincerity', the reader becomes the ideal sympathizer.² Unable to *physically* see the creature, the reader – like De Lacey – must use the 'inward eye' of her imagination to envision Shelley's monster, to engage with his experience, and to understand his suffering.³ The imagination – what Martha Nussbaum calls 'seeing-in' – functions as a moral faculty, being the bridge between self and other, between reader and fictive character, and thus the instigator of sympathetic feeling.⁴ Indeterminate in his multifarious mythic identities, Shelley's mercurial monster is a masterful representation of the human condition. Neither wholly good nor wholly evil, the monster is indeed wholly human; his agonizing modulations between virtue and vice are proof of his essential humanness. And it is precisely because the monster hovers in this space of indeterminacy, becoming and enacting a multitude of mythic identities – and thus externalizing the human condition – that he is finally so sympathetic. The reader recognizes an aspect of herself, of the complexity and inscrutability of the human experience, in Shelley's heterogeneous creature. Through an expert mixing of myths, Shelley has made visible the inner workings of humanity in the sublime – the simultaneously terrifying and beautiful – aspect of Frankenstein's monster. Ultimately, *Frankenstein* makes manifest the manifold possibilities that unfold from an author's commingling of mythic, biblical,

² Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, ed. by D.L. Macdonald, and Kathleen Scherf (Peterborough: Broadview, 2012), pp. 147-148. All subsequent references to this work, hereafter *F*, will appear parenthetically in the text.

³ William Wordsworth, 'I wandered lonely as a Cloud', in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 304.

⁴ Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 38.

and literary figures. For Shelley, these manifold possibilities are of a moral nature: in creating her monster such that he is possessed of a depth akin to every human being, Shelley cultivates concern, summoning sympathy in her readership. Moreover, this sympathetic feeling has the potential to transcend textual boundaries and extend into the reader's own lived experience. In this way, Shelley brings to light the revolutionary potential and social scope of the sympathetic imagination, thereby making her powerful case for sympathy.

Indeed, although the fictive world in which Shelley's multiform and multivalent characters reside – a world that mirrors and mimics a multitude of other mythic realms – is *sans* sympathy, the mechanics of the novel (its narrative form and its sympathy-inspiring characters) are governed by an ethic of sympathy, a philosophy of feeling. In *Frankenstein*, Shelley uses an emotionally engaging narrative form and sophisticated characterizations to rouse her readers' sympathy; through 'fictional world-making', she cultivates her readers' sympathy that it might reach beyond the fictional landscape and redound into her readers' real-world relations.⁵ These mechanisms whereby Shelley draws her readers into her sympathy-stirring fiction serve to enhance the experience of aesthetic activity and persuade her readers to become emotionally invested in the fictional world, to become 'concerned participant[s]' in the lives of its fictive inhabitants.⁶ The architecture of Shelley's fiction, its embedded narratives and the first-person narration of those framing narratives, facilitates the activation and amplification of readerly affect, giving the reader privileged access to each of the main characters' interiority and thereby allowing her to share in the subjective experiences of the novel's complicated and conflicted beings.

⁵ Suzanne Keen, 'Readers' Temperaments and Fictional Character', *New Literary History*, 42 (2011), 298.

⁶ Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 390.

Comprised of three framing narratives, *Frankenstein* unfolds its meaning to the reader as she moves from outermost to innermost narrative. Occupying the fringes of Shelley's fiction is the tale of northern adventurer Robert Walton, which includes his letters to his sister Mrs Saville and his transcription of Frankenstein's narrative. Walton's tale is both a prelude to and a foreshadowing of Frankenstein's narrative, for, like Frankenstein – and like other overreachers and knowledge-seekers such as Icarus, the Miltonic Eve and Satan, Faust, Macbeth, Caleb Williams, and Manfred – Walton is possessed of an 'ardent curiosity' and a vaulting ambition (*F*, p. 52). The captain of a ship bound for the far north, Walton aspires to discover 'unexplored regions'; sailing towards "the land of mist and snow" – a reference to Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) – Walton embarks on a 'great enterprise' that steers him towards the realm of the mythical, towards the 'country of eternal light' (*F*, pp. 56, 53, 51). These descriptive phrases cleverly cue the reader to the fantastical nature of this tale. And it is in the mythologized "land of mist and snow" that the friendless Walton – who 'desire[s] the company of a man who could sympathize with [him]' – encounters the near-death Frankenstein, his Promethean counterpart, his Faustian doppelganger, the sympathetic companion he has sought (*F*, p. 54).

In another echo of the *Ancient Mariner*, Walton's ship becomes 'shut in' by ice, 'surrounded' and 'closed in [. . .] on all sides', and just as the metaphorical albatross manifests in the *Ancient Mariner*, so in *Frankenstein* a 'strange sight' materializes, an 'apparition' that 'seem[s] to denote that' land is near (*F*, p. 58). This 'strange sight', this being of 'gigantic stature', the reader later learns, is Frankenstein's creature, his own self-made albatross, whom Frankenstein is wildly pursuing (*F*, p. 58). Prefiguring Frankenstein's vivification of his monster, Walton and his crew take the 'wretched' Frankenstein – who has been stranded on 'a scattered piece of ice' in his pursuit of his creature – aboard their ship and restore him 'to animation' (*F*,

pp. 208, 59). Shelley's choice of the word 'animation' is revelatory, for it anticipates Frankenstein's 'animation' of 'lifeless matter' (*F*, p. 79). Reanimated, Frankenstein – 'gnash[ing] his teeth' like Goethe's solipsistic Werther and Byron's mad Manfred⁷ – tells Walton his 'tale of horrors' in the hope that he will learn from his example, that his 'strange and terrific story' will deter Walton from embarking on a similar path (*F*, pp. 59, 199, 209).

Recalling Coleridge's transfixing storyteller, the albatross-carrying mariner, Frankenstein mesmerizes his sympathetic auditor – who simultaneously transcribes the narrative – with his 'terrific' tale of mythic proportions, delineating his morally transgressive act of godlike creation.⁸ Frankenstein is at his most Faustian as he tirelessly and monomaniacally pursues the forbidden knowledge of the cause of life's generation, driven forward – like Godwin's Caleb Williams – by 'a resistless, and almost frantic impulse' (*F*, p. 81). Notably, in his search for forbidden knowledge, Frankenstein is also like the inquisitive Eve. And, like Byron's Manfred, who makes his 'eyes familiar with eternity', Frankenstein cuts himself off from humanity as he obsessively investigates illicit knowledge (*M*, 2.2.90). When, swelling with pride, Frankenstein tries to usurp the power of God, he mirrors the Miltonic Satan *and* Goethe's Faust. Just as God declares in Genesis 1.3, 'Let there be light',⁹ so Frankenstein aspires to 'pour [. . .] light' into the world by discovering the spark of life and creating a 'new species', one that would 'bless' him – as humanity blessed God – as its 'creator' (*F*, pp. 80, 81). And in his success, in achieving his cosmic 'undertaking' (*F*, p. 81), Frankenstein is at his most Promethean, becoming, like the Titan

⁷ In Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 80, the mad Werther repeatedly cries, 'I grind my teeth!' and in Byron's *Manfred* (New York: Pearson, 2006), 2.2.131-132, the Romantic exile exclaims, 'I have gnash'd / My teeth in darkness till returning morn'. All subsequent references to this work, hereafter *M*, will appear parenthetically in the text.

⁸ Frankenstein directly aligns himself with Coleridge's mariner when he asks himself, '[c]ould I enter into a festival [a marriage to Elizabeth Lavenza] with this deadly weight yet hanging round my neck, and bowing me to the ground' (*F*, p. 163).

⁹ *The Holy Bible*, rev. edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

– and like the biblical Creator – a ‘maker of mortals’.¹⁰ Fittingly, then, Frankenstein’s creation is a ‘monster’ of ‘gigantic stature’, for, like the monster Orgoglio in Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1590) – a physical manifestation of Redcrosse’s inner pride – Frankenstein’s creation is an exteriorization of his inordinate pride and presumption. Yet, the monster metamorphoses into much more than this: abandoned by his creator, he is left to educate himself – which he does through observing humanity, in particular, the benevolent De Lacey family, and reading – and thus transforms into a being independent of his maker, a being who assumes a multitude of mythic dimensions.

Embedded within Frankenstein’s fantastical tale of ‘filthy creation’, then, is the creature’s own tale of abandonment, exile, and perpetual solitude (*F*, p. 81). In a creative act of ingenuity, Shelley equips her ‘miserable monster’ with a personal, powerful, and poignant voice, furnishing him with such articulacy that the reader cannot resist being moved by his tale (*F*, p. 84). Indeed, like his creator, whose words ‘flow with rapidity and unparalleled eloquence’, the creature moves the implacable Frankenstein – and the reader – through the art of language (*F*, p. 61). Although, by the time it reaches the reader, the monster’s tale is at a far remove – having been told firsthand to Frankenstein who then tells it to Walton who then commits it to paper – the first-person narration of the creature’s affecting narrative, and the feeling with which it is suffused, shepherds the reader’s sympathy towards the monster. The first-person narration of *Frankenstein*’s framed narratives is particularly effective in merging reader with textual being, conveying well to the reader each character’s internality and affording her the opportunity to become intimately acquainted with the innermost recesses of the characters’ subjective lives.

¹⁰ Barry B. Powell, *Classical Myth*, 5th edn (New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2007), p. 112.

Indeed, the imaginative perspective-taking or figurative fusing of self and other that can occur during the reading experience is fundamental to sympathy's 'ethical operation'.¹¹ According to the eighteenth-century moral philosopher Adam Smith (1723-1790) – whose philosophy of social sympathy undergirds *Frankenstein* – the imagination is the mainstay of morality, for it is the faculty whereby we gain insight into another's experience. For both Smith and Shelley, the imagination is illuminative and morally transformative, and it is the requisite precursor to sympathy.¹² For Smith, as for Shelley, sympathy is awakened through the imagination. And because literature engages the imagination so intensely, Smith singles it out as an essential component of his moral theory. The reader's sympathy for fictive characters within the textual realm – those 'word-wrought projection[s] of something very like a human being' – may inspire her to extend that sympathy to real, flesh and blood human beings in her own society.¹³ In short, our affective responses to literature have the power to effect positive social change.

This understanding of sympathy's social and ethical potential is adopted, and deftly illustrated, by Shelley in *Frankenstein*, as evidenced by its proliferation of references to sympathy – the term, in varying inflections, is used thirty times over the course of the novel. Having read the works, both fictional and polemical, of her progressive feminist mother, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) – also influenced by Smith – and having married the highly political poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) and interacted with his group of avant-garde writers, artists, editors, and publishers, Shelley was well-informed in the fields of literature, art, politics,

¹¹ James C. Hatch, 'Disruptive Affects: Shame, Disgust, and Sympathy in *Frankenstein*', *European Romantic Review*, 19.1 (2008), 33.

¹² Smith argues that, '[a]s we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation' through the imagination. '[I]t is by the imagination only', Smith maintains, 'that we can form any conception of' another's 'sensations'. See Adam Smith, *A Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Mineola: Dover, 2006), p. 3.

¹³ Keen, 'Readers' Temperaments', 299.

and philosophy. Moreover, Smith's moral theory – and that of his fellow Moral Sense philosophers, Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713), Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746), and David Hume (1711-1776) – would have been disseminated through Wollstonecraft's radical publisher Joseph Johnson's famous literary circle, with which Percy was intimately involved, and through which the leading philosophies of the day were circulated and debated. Thus, Smith's theory of social sympathy would have reached Shelley via various avenues, whether through her meticulous reading of her mother's works, through conversation with her rational and philosophically-inclined father, or through discussion and debate with her idealistic husband and their numerous intellectual friends.

The term 'sympathy' was in vogue in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and, possessed of a cultural *cachet*, it appeared in the fields of literature, philosophy, politics, psychology, and medicine. In *Frankenstein*, Shelley novelizes Smith's theory of social sympathy, giving sympathy's philosophical form a literary or novelesque spin, and shows her readers – by means of imaginative invention – the horrors of a society wholly bereft of fellow feeling. In so doing, Shelley, with novelistic virtuosity, provides the impetus for change. As a fictional but wholly recognizable representation of the real world, *Frankenstein* is a cautionary tale, demonstrating for the reader just how monstrous a world without sympathy might look. A Gothicized narrative imbued with realism, the real horror of *Frankenstein* stems from the frightening familiarity of its fictional world; the reader is unsettled not because of the implausibility of the tale but because of the uncomfortable conceivability of this fictive universe. Depicting the hubris of its eponymous protagonist's Promethean act of creation and his cowardly abandonment of the being he vivifies,¹⁴ detailing and critiquing Frankenstein's forfeiture of

¹⁴ Frankenstein's act of desertion aligns him with those negligible mothers Wollstonecraft chastises in her *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) for relinquishing their 'duty' to their 'offspring'. Wollstonecraft argues that although 'it be the duty of every

moral responsibility and refusal to extend sympathy to the very creature he has endowed with ‘the spark of being’, *Frankenstein* represents for its readers an extreme example of a world utterly deprived of sympathetic feeling (*F*, p. 83). In *Frankenstein*, Shelley fictionalizes, Gothicizes, and mythologizes her society’s own subjugation of the marginalized ‘other’ – a practice from which our present-day society is not free – providing moral illumination and inspiring prosocial change through literary provocation.

Indeed, Frankenstein’s creature could stand in for women as a whole, subjugated and oppressed within a patriarchal order – thus aligning the novel with Wollstonecraft’s *Mary, A Fiction* (1788) and *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* (1798) – as he could for the African slaves, still being held throughout the British Empire in the year of *Frankenstein*’s publication. Just as the eponymous heroine of Wollstonecraft’s *Mary*, because female, must educate herself, so the monster, because ‘other’, and because neglected by his creator and by society as a whole, must – like women – educate himself. And just as much of Wollstonecraft’s heroine’s self-education occurs during her ramblings amid nature, so the monster’s self-education takes place within the solitude of the natural world. The sympathy-impooverished monster, relegated to the peripheries of society, is Shelley’s nineteenth-century Caliban, deprived of, but desperately desiring, those ‘ties of affection’ so vital to our lived experience (*F*, p. 94). By creating a mythic monster so heterogeneous that he might stand in for any wrongly oppressed being, and by demonstrating the dire consequences of sympathy’s deprivation, Shelley points to the danger of societal apathy and thus to the necessity of social sympathy. Shelley’s multifarious monster, occupying the position of alterity in the narrative, reminds the reader of the undeniable subjectivity of any objectified

rational creature to attend to its offspring’, she is ‘sorry to observe, that reason and duty together have not so powerful an influence over human conduct’; see Mary Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: With Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life* (London: Eighteenth Century Collections Online Print Editions, 1787), pp. 1-2.

‘other’. Through the character of the creature, that masterful conglomerate of mythic identities, Shelley reinvests the object with subjecthood. And it is by means of the monster’s ‘articulacy of feeling’, by means of his eloquence and the effluence of feeling that streams forth when he speaks, that the reader is drawn into sympathetic identification with him and is thus able to feel what it is like to be defined as monstrous, as ‘other’.¹⁵

Consider, for example, the monster’s impassioned entreaty to Frankenstein. Having been abandoned by his compassionless creator and left to fend for and educate himself – only to be confronted by an unsympathetic, intolerant, and utterly hostile humanity – the companionless creature pleads:

How can I move thee? Will not entreaties cause thee to turn a favourable eye upon thy creature, who implores thy goodness and compassion. [*sic*] Believe me, Frankenstein: I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity: but am I not alone, miserably alone?

(*F*, p. 119)

The monster here becomes the Rousseauvian ‘solitary walker’, the cursed Cain, the Romantic social outcast, condemned to perpetual solitude, exiled from all human intercourse and sympathy. The outpouring, poignancy, and almost palpability of emotion evident in the monster’s plea to his callous creator affirm what John Mullan has referred to as the ‘communicative power of feeling’, for Frankenstein is indeed – although, only temporarily – ‘move[d]’ by his creature’s words, finally agreeing to listen to the monster’s tale.¹⁶ “‘For the first time’,’ Frankenstein admits, “‘I felt what the duties of a creator towards his creature were, and that I ought to render him happy before I complained of his wickedness’” (*F*, p. 120). The reader, simultaneously reading the creature’s words, is similarly moved, able to feel the monster’s misery through the

¹⁵ John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth-Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), p. 25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

transportive agency of the sympathetic imagination. By becoming immersed in the monster's narrative, by 'simulating [his] subjective experience' through the moral imagination, the reader comes to care about and feel for the monster.¹⁷ And thus, although Frankenstein's friendless, forlorn, and forsaken creature is deprived of those feeling and 'responsive hearts' he so desires, the reader may serve as surrogate, functioning as his silent companion, providing that sympathetic responsiveness that the characters in the novel will not.¹⁸

That the reader is affected by the monster's tale, that she is *moved* by his words – so laden with emotion – disproves Walton's assertion 'that [paper] is a poor medium for the communication of feeling' (*F*, p. 54). It is precisely because the monster's narrative is so fraught with feeling that the reader experiences such a visceral response to his tale. Indeed, reading *is* a sensory, and thus a physical, experience, and current neurological research is demonstrating how truly transformative our imaginative encounters with literature can be. Recent research in neuroscience has shown that whether we read about something in a novel or experience it in real life, the same regions of our brains are activated, which attests to the power of literature to move us, both literally and metaphorically.¹⁹ As Arnold Weinstein writes, '[f]eeling moves, and feeling moves us'.²⁰ The notion that affective aesthetics can effect positive change, predisposing readers to act in ways that may be morally, socially, and politically transformative, is precisely what Shelley is grappling with in *Frankenstein*. She demonstrates that a reader's sympathetic and

¹⁷ Geoff Kaufman and Lisa Libby, 'Changing Beliefs and Behavior through Experience-Taking', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 103.1 (2012), 9.

¹⁸ Mullan, p. 62

¹⁹ Neurological studies have proven that when we read words associated with smell, the olfactory cortex is activated; when we read metaphors related to texture, the part of our brains connected with touch is stimulated; and when we read metaphors associated with motion, our motor cortex is activated. See Julio Gonzalez, and others, 'Reading *Cinnamon* Activates Olfactory Brain Regions', *NeuroImage*, 32 (2006). See also, Simon Lacey, and others, 'Metaphorically Feeling: Comprehending Textual Metaphors Activates Somatosensory Cortex', *Brain & Language*, 120 (2012), 416-421.

²⁰ Arnold Weinstein, *A Scream Goes Through the House: What Literature Teaches Us About Life* (New York: Random House, 2003), p. xxi.

sensorially-engaged encounter with a work of literature can have real-world relevance. In the case of *Frankenstein* the transformative potential resides in the reader's sympathy for Shelley's ostracized monster, her recognition of his complicatedness – and thus of his humanness – and of the unjustness of his treatment. Through Shelley's evocation of readerly affect in *Frankenstein*, through her sympathy-inspiring characterization of the monster, Shelley aspires to foster a more sympathetically-attuned citizenry.

The monster's tendency to address the indeterminate 'you' is yet another means through which the reader is brought into an affective alliance with the otherwise companionless creature. For example, the monster – attempting to appeal to Frankenstein's sympathy – persuasively declares, "I entreat *you* to hear me"; "[I]et *your* compassion be *moved*, and do not disdain me. Listen to my tale: when *you* have heard that, abandon or commiserate me, as *you* shall judge that I deserve. But hear me" (*F*, pp. 118, 119, my emphasis). The monster's habit of addressing the indeterminate 'you', in which the subject is suspended in referential ambiguity, encourages a sympathetic kinship between reader and fictive character. In this way, the reader becomes a participant in the story, 'commiserat[ing]' with the monster, compassionating with him, where Frankenstein will not. Through *Frankenstein's* feeling-oriented narrative, Shelley aspires to encourage an ethic of social sympathy in her own society, to engender an ethos of fellow feeling.²¹ Through her skilful employment of the sympathy-inspiring medium of fiction, Shelley seeks to mobilize her readers and *move* them towards ethical action, predisposing them to prosocial behaviour.

²¹ Keen argues that, '[w]hile a full-fledged political movement' or 'an appropriately inspiring social context [. . .] may be necessary for efficacious action to arise out of internalized experiences of narrative empathy, readers may respond in those circumstances as a result of earlier reading'. See Suzanne Keen, 'A Theory of Narrative Empathy', *Narrative*, 14.3 (2006), 220.

Shelley's careful characterization of her monster's creator is another means through which she steers her reader's sympathy towards her monster. Frankenstein – in his callous desertion of his creation and in his final refusal to show mercy to his 'miserable monster' – ultimately proves himself to be more monstrous than his apparently 'filthy creation' (*F*, pp. 84, 81). Initially 'moved' by the monster's tale and 'the feelings [. . .] expressed' therein, Frankenstein agrees, at the monster's request, to provide his creature with a female of the same species with whom he might 'live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for [his] being' (*F*, p. 156). The emotional intensity with which the monster's plea is charged is conveyed well to the reader, the exclamation points indicative of the monster's mental anguish: "“Oh! my creator, make me happy; let me feel gratitude towards you for one benefit! Let me see that I excite the sympathy of some existing thing; do not deny me my request!”" (*F*, p. 157). However, Frankenstein's compassion is fleeting, for in a fit of madness, fearing the monster might relinquish his promise to live in peace and instead propagate a new species – 'a race of devils' – and wreak havoc on the world, Frankenstein destroys his work before it is completed, thus depriving the monster of the requisite sympathy of a fellow creature (*F*, p. 174).

Ironically, it is the monster, and not the man, who recognizes sympathy's fundamentality to morality, both personal and public. Echoing Smith and his fellow Moral Sense philosophers, the creature thus instructs his human creator in the ethical import of social sympathy:

If I have no ties and no affections, hatred and vice must be my portion. [...] My vices are the children of a forced solitude that I abhor; and my virtues will necessarily arise when I live in communion with an equal. I shall feel the affections of a sensitive being, and become linked in the chain of existence of events, from which I am now excluded.

(*F*, p. 158)

However, like Shakespeare's social outcast Caliban, Frankenstein's monster – because of his outward form – is cut off from all fellow feeling. As the monster laments, “I had feelings of affection”,’ but “they were requited by detestation and scorn” (*F*, p. 176). “If any being felt emotions of benevolence towards me”,’ the monster explains – still giving voice to the moral philosophy of the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment – “I should return them an hundred and an hundred fold” (*F*, p. 157). Shelley's eloquent creature expresses well the ethical theory that sympathy begets virtue.

It is by way of the beneficent De Lacey family that the creature first learns sympathy. Taking up abode in a hovel that adjoins the De Laceys' cottage, the monster is witness to familial love. While watching from a crevice in his hovel as the blind old father plays his musical instrument, the creature feels the first stirrings of sympathy. Seeing the daughter Agatha cry in response to her father's music and the old man ‘rais[ing] her, and smil[ing] with . . . kindness and affection’, the creature compassionates, feeling ‘sensations of a peculiar and overpowering nature’ that are ‘a mixture of pain and pleasure’ (*F*, p. 126). Indeed, so intense is the creature's sympathetic responsivity to this scene of familial affection that he ‘withdr[aws] from the window, unable to bear [the] emotions’ evoked (*F*, p. 126). In this way, Shelley gives a literary twist to the moral theory of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith, novelizing their philosophy of sympathy in the experience of the monster, whose vicarious feeling, whose ability to physically *feel with* others, engenders his ethical awareness.²² As the monster states, “when [the De Laceys] were unhappy, I felt depressed; when they rejoiced, I sympathized in their joys” (*F*, p. 129). Indeed, it is via his sympathetic encounters with the De Lacey family that the

²² David Hume maintains that sympathy ‘is a very powerful principle in human nature’, taking us ‘far out of ourselves’ and affording us the opportunity to experience another's happiness or sorrow. See *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. by David Fate Norton, and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 369, 370.

monster learns virtue, that he – to quote the title of Nussbaum’s book – ‘cultivat[es] [his] humanity’.²³ And it is the monster’s sympathy for the poverty-stricken family that inspires him to altruistic action.

In his observations of the De Lacey family, the monster learns that the cause of their unhappiness is poverty. Seeing that the children ‘place food before the old man’ but reserve ‘none for themselves’, the creature is ‘sensibly’ ‘*moved*’ by this ‘trait of kindness’ (*F*, p. 128, my emphasis). Having ‘been accustomed, during the night, to steal a part of [the family’s] store for [his] own consumption’, the monster, after discovering ‘that in doing this [he] inflicted pain on the cottagers’, seeks food elsewhere, satisfying himself ‘with berries, nuts, and roots’ (*F*, p. 128). Like Shelley’s husband Percy, the monster is a vegetarian, indicative of his gentle nature. Moreover, discerning from his position of compassionate spectator that one of De Lacey’s son Felix’s daily tasks is collecting firewood, the monster assumes it for him – and so mirrors the firewood-fetching Caliban. Under cover of night, expecting no recompense, the monster replenishes the family’s store of firewood; it thus seems, ‘to [Felix’s] perpetual astonishment’, that the task has been accomplished ‘by an invisible hand’ (*F*, p. 130). Notably, Shelley makes reference to Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ twice in this section of the novel, but with a significant variation. While Smith uses the phrase as a metaphor for the ‘unintended’ benefit that each individual’s self-interested ‘striving to better [her] condition’ bestows on others, thereby ‘advancing the interest of society’, in the case of the benevolent monster, his actions arise not from self-interest but from genuine altruism.²⁴ The only motivating factor behind his acts of kindness is sympathy. In this way, Shelley demonstrates the extent of the monster’s humanity. As

²³ Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

²⁴ Charles L. Griswold, ‘Imagination: Morals, Science, and Arts’, *The Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith*, ed. by Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2006), p. 45.

the compassionate creature tells Frankenstein, “‘I cleared [the family’s] path from the snow, and performed those offices that I had seen done by Felix. I afterwards found that these labours, performed by an invisible hand, greatly astonished them; and once or twice I heard them [. . .] utter the words *good spirit, wonderful*”’ (F, p. 131). Thus, having cultivated his sympathy through observing the De Lacey family, the monster simultaneously develops a moral conscience; he *becomes* virtuous.

The other avenue through which Shelley’s monster learns morality is literature. In this way, Shelley redoubles the persuasive force of her case for sympathy, artfully demonstrating the ethical efficacy of literature through literature itself. Shelley cleverly constructs a character within her fiction who is himself a reader and who has been made more sympathetic through his reading. Indeed, it is through his reading that the monster evolves into a fully individuated and wholly compassionate being. In exercising his imagination through avid reading, the self-educated monster – like the reader – stretches his sympathetic capacities and enlarges his ethical awareness.²⁵ Reading literature facilitates an imaginative leap between self and other, allowing us to re-see the world from another’s perspective, and so to reflect upon and sympathize with another’s subjective life. As Jonathan B. Wight argues, it is ‘through [such] interior reflections’, provoked by literature, that, according to Smith’s ethical theory, ‘[m]oral conscience unfolds’.²⁶ And just as the monster’s reading unfolds his moral conscience, so the reader’s ethical scope broadens through her emotional engagement with this wrongly persecuted being. In feeling for this fictional character, the reader learns to feel for similar beings in the real world.

²⁵ Nussbaum argues that reading literature ‘is among the ways in which we constitute ourselves as moral, and thus as fully human, beings’, for ‘as we read novels [. . .] we quite naturally assume the viewpoint of an affectionate and responsive social creature, who looks at all the scene before him with fond and sympathetic attention’. See *Love’s Knowledge*, p. 346.

²⁶ Wight, ‘Adam Smith’s Ethics and the “Noble Arts”’, *Review of Social Economy*, 64.2 (2006), 159.

Having been introduced to language through listening to Felix teach French to his beloved Safie, the creature, as he ‘improve[s] in speech’, also learns the ‘science of letters’, the art of reading, and is thus well-prepared to delve into his self-education (*F*, p. 134). His reading list is comprised of the first volume of Plutarch’s *Lives*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), and Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). The studious creature’s experience of readership teaches him, in broad terms, about the depth and breadth of the human experience, and, more narrowly, about himself. The ‘lofty sentiments and feelings’ expressed in *Werther*, which have ‘for their object something out of self’, accord with the creature’s ‘experience among [his] protectors’, for his surreptitious acts of selflessness and generosity arise from his *own* ‘lofty sentiments and feelings’, from his genuine sympathy (*F*, p. 142). However, his reading of *Werther* also opens his eyes to his ‘otherness’, to his fundamental difference from humanity:

As I read [. . .] I applied much personally to my own feelings and condition. I found myself similar, yet at the same time strangely unlike the beings concerning whom I read, and to whose conversation I was a listener. I sympathized with, and partly understood them, but [. . .] I was dependent on none, and related to none.

(*F*, p. 142)

Because of his outward form, the exiled creature is cut off from all human contact, and because of the nature of his birth and his creator’s abandonment of him, he is ‘dependent on’ and ‘related to’ no one.²⁷ The monster is deprived of those ‘ties of affection’ so necessary to our lived experience (*F*, p. 194). Indeed, the monster’s reading is so illuminative that it precipitates an existential crisis: “‘My person was hideous, and my stature gigantic: what did this mean? Who was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?’” (*F*, pp. 142-43). The monster’s self-inquiry is indicative of his humanity, for such existential examination is a necessary and

²⁷ In his sense of his own separateness from humanity, the monster recalls Byron’s Romantic exile Manfred, whose ‘spirit’ walks ‘not with the souls of men’ (*M*, 2.2.51).

inescapable part of the human condition. Reading provokes self-reflection, critical contemplation, and connection-making between the story world and the reader's own life, and this is precisely the case for Shelley's well-read monster. Through his reading, the creature questions both himself and the world around him. Aesthetic activity has the power to create intelligent and critically-aware individuals able to distinguish between right and wrong actions, individuals furnished with the imaginative and moral equipment necessary to make appropriate ethical judgments. It is by way of his reading that the monster metamorphoses into a morally-conscious being.

The contemplative creature's reading of Plutarch's *Lives*, for example, develops within him an 'ardour for virtue' and an 'abhorrence for vice' (*F*, p. 143). But it is his reading of *Paradise Lost* that has the most powerful effect; Milton's biblically-based epic poem 'move[s]' in the creature 'every feeling of wonder and awe' (*F*, pp. 143-44). In reading *Paradise Lost*, the creature paradoxically likens himself to Milton's Adam *and* to the exiled and envy-filled Satan. Like Adam, he understands what it is like to be separate, divided from 'any other being in existence'; however, while Adam is protected and educated by his creator, the creature is deserted by his (*F*, p. 143). Consequently, like Satan, exiled from happiness and sympathy, the monster comes to resent the 'bliss' of those beings fortunately 'linked in the chain of existence', the 'bitter gall of envy [rising] within [him]' (*F*, pp. 158, 144). Yet, he later recognizes that even 'Satan had his companions, fellow-devils to admire and encourage him', whereas he is 'solitary and detested' (*F*, p. 144). Through his reading, the meditative monster becomes increasingly aware of the injustice of his situation – of the immorality of his creator's abandonment of him and of humanity's refusal to show him sympathy. And the reader, through the imaginative experience of 'self-other merging', comes to further sympathize with the creature's suffering.²⁸

²⁸ Kaufman and Libby, 2.

Thus, even as the ostracized creature spirals into vice after being rejected by the De Lacey family, the reader's sympathy remains focused on this wrongly persecuted being. The reader, having undergone an 'experiential merging with [this] protagonist', feels the monster's misery – via the sympathetic imagination – when, horrified by his outward appearance, the young cottagers force him away from their father as the creature is pleading for compassion and friendship.²⁹ As Muriel Spark writes, 'the reader's sympathy [is] transported' to, and remains fixed upon, 'the Monster', who has 'unfold[ed] the story of his struggles and development'.³⁰ After being beaten by Felix and driven out of the cottage, the monster contemplates suicide: "Cursed, cursed creator! Why did I live? Why, in that instant, did I not extinguish the spark of existence which you had so wantonly bestowed?" (*F*, p. 149). In his despair, the monster mirrors Manfred – who seeks 'Oblivion, self-oblivion' (*M*, 1.1.144) – and anticipates Shelley's later death-desiring heroine, Matilda – who asks the daring Humean question, 'Why am I obliged to live?'³¹ '[D]riven from the society and sympathy of [his] fellow-creatures', the socially-alienated creature experiences the hitherto foreign 'feelings of revenge and hatred' (*F*, pp. 148, 151). "I, like the arch fiend", the monster proclaims, echoing Milton's Satan, "bore a hell within me" (*F*, p. 149). Denied all human sympathy, the monster, now mimicking the Miltonic Satan, 'declare[s] everlasting war against the species, and, more than all, against' his creator, who had sent him 'forth to this insupportable misery' (*F*, p. 149). Yet, despite the creature's descent into sin, despite his fall from innocence into guilt-ridden experience, the reader's sympathy for the monster persists, having been awakened and cultivated through the monster's moving personal

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁰ Muriel Spark, *Child of Light: Mary Shelley* (New York: Welcome Rain, 1987), p. 172.

³¹ Mary Shelley, 'Matilda', *Mary Wollstonecraft: Mary and Maria; Mary Shelley: Matilda*, ed. by Janet Todd (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 198.

narrative of unjust persecution. Indeed, via Shelley's novelistic artistry, a 'fellowship of feeling' has developed between the reader and this fictive character.³²

Therefore, when the heretofore innocent and Adamic monster temporarily takes on the role of Miltonic Satan, burning the De Lacey's cottage to the ground – evocative of the fires of hell – the reader, having been immersed in his narrative and having 'simulat[ed] [his] subjective experience' through the literary imagination, understands and sympathizes with his act of desperation.³³ And as the monster's series of crimes are unfolded to the reader, she, having developed an 'affective attachment' to this wronged creature, is predisposed to, if not absolve him of his sins, at least understand them.³⁴ However, in the fictive world of the novel, the creature, wretched and 'miserably alone', barred from a social existence, is only met with persecution and injustice. As the hapless monster comes to recognize, it is in vain that he seeks 'justice' from any being who wears 'the human form' (*F*, p. 152). Thus, proving that, like Milton's Satan, he too can 'work mischief', the momentarily malevolent monster murders Frankenstein's younger brother William, his 'heart swell[ing] with exultation and hellish triumph' (*F*, pp. 155, 154). Like Shakespeare's morally transgressive Macbeth – whose conscience hovers 'between fair and foul, foul and fair'³⁵ until the 'milk of human kindness', his humanity, is replaced with 'gall'³⁶ – the monster oscillates between virtue and vice until the 'mildness of [his] nature [is] fled, and all within [him] [is] turned to gall and bitterness' (*F*, p. 152). However, unlike Macbeth, the monster does not relinquish his humanity entirely, for his

³² Mullan, p. 33.

³³ Kaufman and Libby, 9.

³⁴ John Bugg, "Master of Their Language": Education and Exile in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 68.4 (2005), p. 657.

³⁵ G.R. Elliott, *Dramatic Providence in Macbeth: A Study of Shakespeare's Tragic Theme of Humanity and Grace with a Supplementary Essay on King Lear* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1958), p. 36.

³⁶ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, ed. by Nicholas Brooke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 1.5.15.

self-education and reading have instilled in him a sense of morality; his conscience still clings to him.

That the monster's moral consciousness remains intact, even as his sins accumulate, is clear in his willingness to forgive Frankenstein his sins – to forgive his desertion of him and his abdication of moral responsibility – if Frankenstein will create for him a ‘companion [. . .] of the same species’, a female who will show him sympathy (*F*, p. 157). Again articulating the theory of the eighteenth-century Moral Sense philosophers, the rational creature contends that, once provided with a companion, his “‘evil passions will’” flee, “‘for [he] shall’” meet “‘with sympathy’” (*F*, p. 157). Yet, as mentioned above, the creature is ultimately denied ‘the only benefit that [could] soften [his] heart, and render [him] harmless’ – the sympathy of another – the withholding of which triggers the inevitable unfolding of his sins, so satanic in magnitude (*F*, p. 158). Witness to the destruction of his only possible friend and sympathizer, the anguished creature bemoans, “‘Shall each man [. . .] find a wife for his bosom, and each beast have his mate, and I be alone? I had feelings of affection, and they were requited by detestation and scorn’” (*F*, p. 176). The vice the monster now embraces is thus a corollary of humanity's refusal of sympathy. Had any compassion been extended to the monster, he would have remained virtuous. However, condemned to perpetual exile, the monster resorts to revenge, murdering both Frankenstein's friend Henry Clerval – the idealistic Shelleyan poet – and his betrothed, Elizabeth Lavenza. The murders of Clerval and Elizabeth, and the death of Frankenstein's father – which is precipitated by the news of the murders – similarly awaken Frankenstein ‘to revenge’, the remainder of his ‘hideous narration’ therefore becoming a Godwinian tale of flight and pursuit, with the creature being hunted by his vengeful creator (*F*, p. 200).

In his obsessive pursuit of his monster, Frankenstein becomes – like his creature – an exile, a solitary wanderer. And although Frankenstein is the hunter, it is the creature who is possessed of the real power. As one of the messages the creature leaves for his creator states, “‘you live, and my power is complete’” (*F*, p. 205). By leaving clues for his frantic pursuer to keep him on track, the creature succeeds in prolonging Frankenstein’s suffering. Wholly transfixed by revenge, Frankenstein becomes as miserable and alone as his monster, separated from all human intercourse. And after three weeks of mad pursuit, Frankenstein is *literally* split from his creature – the only being with whom he has any connection – for the ice on which hunter and hunted are driving their sleds cracks, and ‘a tumultuous sea roll[s] between [Frankenstein] and [his] enemy’, leaving a near-death Frankenstein ‘drifting on a scattered piece of ice’ (*F*, p. 208). The image of Frankenstein drifting alone on a vast and empty ocean in a frozen world is a symbolic representation of his creature’s own lonely and isolated existence. In this way, Frankenstein is made to feel the alienation, bleakness, and solitude to which he has condemned his creature; physically divided from one another and from humanity, creator and creation thus become, paradoxically, one and the same in their shared separateness.

However, Frankenstein does not recognize his affinity with his creature, his commonality with his monster – a realization that might have awakened his sympathy – and remains vengeful and delusional until his death. And consequently, he never regains the reader’s sympathy; the shift in sympathy from creator to creation remains fixed. “‘I feel myself justified in desiring the death of my adversary’”, a self-vindictory Frankenstein proclaims to his (only) sympathetic auditor, Walton, whom he bids assume his ‘unfinished work’, the ‘task of [the creature’s] destruction’ (*F*, p. 216). Unremorseful to the bitter end, Frankenstein fully metamorphoses into Milton’s implacable and eternally vengeful Satan, proving to be more monstrous than his

monster in his failure to sympathize. Ironically, the monster abandons his guise of Miltonic Satan and transforms into a fully individuated and wholly compassionate being, afflicted by the very pangs of conscience that mark humanity, and so proving more human than his creator. And, in yet another act of novelistic ingenuity, Shelley gives her creature the last word, overshadowing Frankenstein's deathbed-speech with her creature's oratorical wizardry.

Consumed by misery, guilt, and remorse, the creature – whom Walton finds mourning over Frankenstein's coffin – further demonstrates his humanity by compassionating with his creator, who has shown him nothing but hate: ““Oh, Frankenstein! Generous and self-devoted being! What does it avail that I now ask thee to pardon me? I, who irretrievably destroyed thee by destroying all thou lovedst”” (*F*, p. 217). Walton, like the reader, perceives the authenticity of emotion in the creature's words: ““His voice seemed suffocated; and my first impulses, which had suggested to me the duty of obeying the dying request of my friend [. . .] were now suspended by a mixture of curiosity and compassion”” (*F*, p. 217). Like the reader, Walton is moved by the monster's words, affected by the feeling with which they are fraught. Again echoing the theory of the eighteenth-century Moral Sense philosophers, the creature maintains that his ““heart was fashioned to be susceptible of love and sympathy”,’ and thus, ““when wrenched by misery to vice and hatred”,’ his heart ““did not endure the violence of the change without torture”” (*F*, p. 218). Although the creature despairs that ““[n]o sympathy may [he] ever find”,’ the reader, affected by his personal narrative, may provide the sympathy the creature has been denied (*F*, p. 219). Shelley, that masterful arbiter of affect, has forged a sympathetic kinship between the reader and this fictive character, cleverly ‘call[ing] upon’ her readers’ ‘built-in capacity to feel with others’ and thereby cultivating sympathy for her persecuted creature.³⁷ And

³⁷ Keen, ‘Narrative Empathy’, 209.

because the creature is representative of any subjugated ‘other’, Shelley simultaneously cultivates concern for similar persecuted beings in the real world.

Indeed, Shelley’s mythic realm of Gothicized horror is infused with such realism that the reader cannot help but detect her own world reflected therein. Therefore, when the creature condemns humanity for its sins, for its prejudice and sympathetic impoverishment – once again using the indeterminate ‘you’ – the reader feels as if the creature is speaking to her directly:

I still desired love and fellowship, and I was still spurned. Was there no injustice in this? Am I to be thought the only criminal, when all human kind sinned against me? Why do *you* not hate Felix, who drove his friend from his door with contumely? Why do *you* not execrate the rustic who sought to destroy the saviour of his child?

(*F*, pp. 219-20, my emphasis)

At this point in the narrative, the creature has transformed into humanity’s moral conscience; he is Smith’s imaginatively-wrought ‘impartial spectator’ made manifest. The ‘standard relative to which the rightness and wrongness of character and action is judged’, Smith’s ‘impartial spectator’ is ‘constitutive of the moral outlook’.³⁸ The ‘impartial spectator’ is the figurative self that each individual bodies forth via her imagination in order that she might judge her actions as they would be seen by another. The creature here clearly functions as humanity’s Smithian ‘impartial spectator’, judging the rightness and wrongness of its actions.

However, quarantined from all human sympathy, the creature is unable to endure an existence of enforced solitude. Like Shelley’s future heroine Matilda, the creature seeks comfort in death: “‘I shall collect my funeral pile, and consume to ashes this miserable frame. [. . .] I shall die. I shall no longer feel the agonies which now consume me’” (*F*, p. 220). “[W]here can I find rest”, asks the creature, “‘but in death?’” (*F*, p. 220). Unlike his creator – who dies unrelenting

³⁸ Griswold, pp. 38, 39.

in his hatred of the creature he abandons, calling upon Walton to ‘thrust [his] sword into [the creature’s] heart’ and assuring him that he ‘will hover near, and direct the steel aright’ – the creature is self-condemnatory and penitent, and thus, wholly sympathetic (*F*, p. 209). The ‘aesthetic effects’³⁹ of such novelistic affect, the ethical efficacy of the reader’s experience of ‘self-other merging’, are possessed of revolutionary potential, for the reader, faced with the reality of prejudice as depicted on Shelley’s fictional canvas, may be moved to altruistic action addressing such discriminatory practices in her own society.⁴⁰ The creature’s final Wertherian yearning for death – which derives from his acute awareness of the injustices of a prejudiced society entirely hostile to his apparent ‘monstrosity’ – is an authorial invocation to the reader, a call for change. In longing for death, the creature is also longing for a world that might be, one populated by sympathetic individuals capable of accepting difference.

The creature’s desire for death thus becomes a radical summons to action, his recourse to suicide intended to provoke readerly indignation and thereby activate real-world ethical responsivity. As Shelley’s husband Percy maintains, the literary artist ‘beholds the future in the present, and [her] thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of the latest time’, her imaginative creation providing the impetus for transformative action.⁴¹ Therefore, although Shelley’s wronged creature will not live to see the reformed society that would accept his difference, her readers, by responding sympathetically to the creature, may participate in the institution of just such a society, one governed by an ethic of social sympathy. Shelley thus encourages readerly collaboration in her reformatory agenda, instigating a movement beyond the novel’s pages whereby the reader may provide the resolution in the real world. In this way,

³⁹ Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. ix.

⁴⁰ Kaufman and Libby, 2

⁴¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘A Defence of Poetry’, *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, 3rd edn, 5 vols, ed. by David Damrosch, and Kevin J.H. Dettmar (New York: Pearson, 2006), IIA, p. 869.

Shelley makes her powerful case for sympathy. Commingling various classical, biblical, and literary mythologies within her nineteenth-century Gothic fiction – and adding her own modern twist – Shelley not only offers a serious social critique but provides the means to change; having shown her readers the monstrosity of a world divorced of fellow feeling and having cultivated their sympathy for her socially-oppressed creature, Shelley has equipped her readers with an ethical awareness that may extend into the real world.

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