

# Aesthetics in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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## Abstract

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* the brilliant scientist Viktor Frankenstein constructs and animates a gigantic and superhumanly powerful man. But upon animation, Frankenstein discovers he neglected beauty, and beholding his hideous creation flees in horror without even naming the man. Abandoned and alone the monster leaves society, yet secretly observing humanity learns language and philosophy and eventually discovers humanity's self-understanding and his own self-understanding to be grounded in beauty rather than reason.

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When I placed my head on my pillow, I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie. I saw – with shut eyes, but acute mental vision – I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion.

— Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, Author's Introduction (8–9)

## 1. Shelley's Dream

In her Author's Introduction Mary Shelley recalls the half-waking dream that would become her brilliant philosophical science fiction novel *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*. The “pale student of unhallowed arts” would become the great scientist and modern Prometheus, Viktor Frankenstein, and the “hideous phantasm of a man stretched out” upon the “powerful engine” would become the infamous and terrifying monster. In the novel Frankenstein reverse engineers (engineering by copying form) an artificial man from parts of men and animals and then animates and awakens the assemblage of nonliving parts. But in the moment of animation, when the artificial man rises and opens his eyes and beholds his creator, Frankenstein discovers his creation to be the most horribly hideous thing in the world. Frankenstein, unable to bear the aesthetic horror, flees without naming the artificial man or teaching him to speak or survive on his own. If Adam and Eve with their sudden self-consciousness found themselves abandoned and exiled from the Garden

of Eden, and forced to form the first civilization, then at the height of that same civilization this new and unnamed artificial Adam, without self-consciousness, now finds himself abandoned and alone, and forced into the wilderness, for none can behold him except in mortal horror. But in the wilderness, and gazing like a scientist on civilization, the artificial man acquires language, and even learns philosophy, and ultimately discovers the true nature of humanity. Instead of the rational animal humanity has always taken itself to be, the artificial man discovers humanity to be the aesthetic animal enamored of the magical power of beauty, and himself tragically no part of humanity.

The present essay develops this philosophical interpretation of *Frankenstein* according to the following structure. Section 2, "Creation and Discovery of the Monster" describes Frankenstein's method of construction and subsequent discovery of his failure to form the artificial man as beautiful. Section 3, "The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Monster" examines the aesthetic problem of the monster in relation to Aristotle's theory of the beautiful, and the theory of the sublime in Longinus, Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, and George Santayana. Section 4, "Viktor Frankenstein on the Beautiful and the Sublime" examines Frankenstein's own philosophical study of mountains and ruined castles as beautiful and sublime. Section 5, "The Monster in the Mountains" examines the destruction of Frankenstein's aesthetic experience with the appearance of the monster in the mountains. Section 6, "The Monster's Philosophy" examines the meeting of the man and the monster in the mountains, where the monster eloquently unfolds his heartbreaking story, his hard-won philosophical understanding of the true nature of humanity, his painful acceptance of permanent exile, and finally his request that Frankenstein form for him a female monster so they two may leave civilization for the wilderness. Section 7 concludes the essay.

## **2. Creation and Discovery of the Monster**

Originally Frankenstein intended to give the artificial man normal size but the human biological form is composed of very minute parts intricately connected and difficult to handle.

As the minuteness of the parts formed a great hindrance to my speed, I resolved, contrary to my first intention, to make the being of a gigantic stature; that is to say, about eight feet in height, and proportionably large. (Shelley, 52)

Frankenstein uses parts of large human cadavers and other large animals as may be found in the slaughterhouse such as pigs and cattle and horses. As Frankenstein recalls, "The dissecting room and the slaughter-house furnished many of my materials" (53). Anyone might feel disgust at these organs and bones and blood of different species categorized and meticulously prepared for some terrible laboratory synthesis, but Frankenstein delights in the correspondence of anatomical parts of different animals, and how they may be fit together to form a new kind of being. As a scientist Frankenstein examines the anatomical parts in almost purely mechanical terms and apparently without vision of their final aesthetic design except a general proportionality necessary for functionality of form.

But in the moment the dead mass of parts wakes and breathes and slowly moves Frankenstein's pride and elation become terror and disgust. Frankenstein says, "I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs" (56). As Frankenstein looks into the living and dead yellow eyes he sees death itself staring back at him.

His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shriveled complexion and straight black lips. (56)

Everything about the artificial man is inhuman and all that appears to be human and even otherwise beautiful only exacerbates the inhumanity of his appearance by identity with humanity. The teeth "of pearly whiteness" and hair "a lustrous black, and flowing" might add beauty to a handsome man or beautiful woman, but instead render the artificial man even more visually confusing and disgusting. The face and body appear to be a patchwork of pieces of so many species in a foul tangle of traits and hideous stitchery. Frankenstein has worked only with material and efficient causality, in Aristotle's sense in the *Physics*, and not the final causality revealed in all the magical masks of form and light worn by nature's wondrously beautiful creatures, especially man and woman.

The once proud scientist beholds his creation in terror and disgust, but also disturbed confusion at how he, Frankenstein, with such brilliant eyes and masterful hands, could have made such a horrible thing. Frankenstein says, "I beheld the wretch – the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me" (Shelley, 57). As Harold Bloom writes in his Introduction to his edited volume of critical essays, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, "When the 'dull yellow eye' of his creature opens, this creator falls from the autonomy of a supreme artificer to the terror of a child of earth: 'breathless horror and disgust filled my heart'" (Bloom, 6–7). Denise Gigante in "Facing the Ugly: The Case of *Frankenstein*" similarly highlights the scene of the "dull yellow eye" strangely "'doubling from a single yellow eye' to two 'watery eyes'" (Gigante, 571). Gigante writes of Frankenstein, "He notices with disgust how the eyeballs are lost in the murkiness, the 'dun-white' of their surrounding sockets, and he even doubts 'if eyes they may be called'" (571). The monster's eyes look like dead watery blobs of opaque yellow glop, failing in color and form and depth, somehow mechanically capable of sight but without glow as index of a man. Floating lost in their murkiness, without reason informing sight with concepts, these eyes know not they are dead. And yet, the monster beholds the man, and apparently by nature smiles happily like a child, and even tries to speak, but already Frankenstein draws back in hatred.

His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped, and rushed downstairs. (Shelley, 57)

The monster beholds his father, but Frankenstein beholds neither his son nor a man but horror itself in the shape of a man and speechless runs. Frankenstein may appear detestable for his abandonment if not for his creation of the monster, but any man would run or worse.

According to Noël Carroll in "The Nature of Horror," "Many monsters of the horror genre are interstitial and/or contradictory in terms of being both living and dead: ghosts, zombies, vampires, mummies, the Frankenstein monster, Melmoth, and so on" (Carroll, 55). Frankenstein himself describes the monster in exactly these terms, as alive and dead at once, and even calls the monster a "mummy" and a "demoniacal corpse" (Shelley, 57).

Oh! no mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch. I had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then; but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived. (57)

Frankenstein's description may seem excessive compared to Dante Alighieri's terrifying monsters in the *Inferno*, in *The Divine Comedy*, like the Gorgon Medusa whose eyes once seen turn men to stone (Dante, *Inferno* IX, lines 46–60), those eyes that contrast with the perfectly beautiful glowing eyes of his beloved Beatrice in the Garden of Eden atop the mountain of Purgatory which "transhumanize" Dante in preparation for his flight through Paradise (*Paradiso* I, lines 67–72). But Dante traversing the underworld need not behold himself as if in an ontological mirror beholding these terrifying yet imprisoned monsters, while that is precisely Frankenstein's experience in beholding his creation now alive and free to roam the Earth. Frankenstein beholds in the monster a seemingly infinitely shattered and horrifying kaleidoscopic mirror image of humanity, and by this very identity and hideous non-identity with humanity the monster undermines the unity and goodness of humanity. Every man beholds himself in ontological reflection in the eyes of every other man and woman, but no man can behold himself except in absolute terror in beholding the face and form of the monster. His face in the light carries pain to the eye.

Frankenstein's discovery of what he has done and not done forces a reversal of direction of action of plot, consistent with Aristotle's theory of tragedy in the *Poetics*. According to Aristotle, a tragedy is an imitation of a whole action in which a good man's error or fault causes him to fall terribly from good to bad fortune. In *Poetics* 11 Aristotle claims the tragic plot action reversal to be best when attended by a simultaneous "discovery."

A discovery is, as the very word implies, a change from ignorance to knowledge, and thus to either love or hate, in the personages marked for good or evil fortune. The finest form of discovery is one attended by reversal, like that which goes with the discovery in *Oedipus*. (Aristotle, vol. 2, 1451<sup>a</sup>30–34, 2324)

In Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* the good king Oedipus once saved Thebes by solving the riddle of the Sphinx with self-knowledge. But now Thebes starves and sickens and dies because the murder mystery of the last king, Laios, remains unsolved; so Oedipus, proud of

his intellect, vows to solve the mystery. Oedipus consults the blind but all-seeing prophet Teiresias, but Teiresias refuses assistance, so Oedipus insults Teiresias for blindness, and then Teiresias insults Oedipus for mental blindness. Teiresias knows Oedipus to be the very man he seeks. Oedipus unknowingly murdered his father the king, and then married his mother the queen with whom he fathered his siblings. But the mentally blind detective Oedipus eventually uncovers the truth, and finally sees with the eyes of Teiresias: "Now everything is clear" (Sophocles, 77). In the moment Oedipus discovers himself to be the murderer, the action of the plot reverses. His wife and mother Queen Jocasta hangs herself, and Oedipus beholding her hanged removes her long gold pins from her gown, and plunges them deep into his eyeballs. Finally Oedipus leaves Thebes in exile, as blind as Teiresias, pitifully knowing all.

Like Oedipus, Frankenstein is proud of his intellect, and similarly blind to his actions (at least while he performs them), and in the moment of self-discovery the plot reverses against him as well. In this moment of discovery Frankenstein suffers both changes Aristotle identifies for the tragic hero. Frankenstein passes from ignorance to knowledge of his creation and himself, and from love to hate of his creation and himself. But Frankenstein's discovery is not quite a philosophically reflective discovery because, while he knows he neglected beauty, he knows not yet the all-importance of beauty to the identity of humanity. But the monster will make precisely this discovery upon beholding himself with the eyes of a philosopher, and this discovery will also carry unbearable pity and terror, which are the primary emotions of all great tragedies (such as *Oedipus the King*), according to Aristotle in *Poetics* 6, 11, and 14 (e.g., 1449<sup>b</sup>24–28, 2320).

### 3. The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Monster

According to Aristotle in *Metaphysics* XIII.3, "The chief forms of beauty are order and symmetry and definiteness, which the mathematical sciences demonstrate in a special degree" (Aristotle, vol. 1, 1078<sup>a</sup>36–1078<sup>b</sup>1, 1075). For example, the objects of geometry such as the sphere and the cube and the pyramid with their symmetry and order and wondrous elegance of line especially reveal the beautiful. But in *Frankenstein* the monster's lines seem to be scribbled and scratched and blotted so haphazardly not even in negation can they reveal the beautiful. In *Poetics* 7 Aristotle applies his mathematical aesthetics to animals:

Again: to be beautiful, a living creature, and every whole made up of parts, must not only present a certain order in its arrangement of parts, but also be of a certain definite magnitude. Beauty is a matter of size and order, and therefore impossible either in a very minute creature, since our perception becomes indistinct as it approaches instantaneity; or in a creature of vast size—one, say, 1000 miles long—as in that case, instead of the object being seen all at once, the unity and wholeness of it is lost to the beholder. (Aristotle, vol. 2, 1450<sup>b</sup>34–1451<sup>a</sup>2, 2322)

To be beautiful a creature must not be too small or too large because it must be perceivable as a whole form, and the whole form must also reveal unity among the parts, and the wholeness of the creature must predominate over the parts, which serve the unity of the

whole. If the creature is too small, then it cannot be seen as a whole with good arrangement of parts, e.g., a clover mite. If the creature is too large, then it cannot be seen as a whole at all, and only the parts appear, e.g., Aristotle's imaginary creature, a thousand miles long. (For perspective, Earth's moon's radius is 1,079 miles long, so Aristotle's imaginary creature is about half the diameter of the moon.) In *Frankenstein* the monster is large but not colossal, so he can be seen as a whole form, but the parts appear hatefully assembled and violently disarranged, and therefore predominate over the wholeness of form. The monstrous man is not one man but many men and many animals dead and dismembered and reassembled and revealing everywhere sour asymmetry and ontological jumble.

The monster's great size only renders this horrible disarrangement more horrible. If the monster were well formed, then his great magnitude might render him brilliantly handsome, perhaps like the "great-souled man" in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* IV.3 (Aristotle, vol. 2, 1123<sup>b</sup>5–7 and 30, 1773). But instead the monster's magnitude exacerbates his inhuman hideousness and renders him sensuously violent. At eight feet in height with elephantine size and superhuman strength the monster inhabits the ambiguous space between man and giant and this ambiguity augments the horror of his appearance with confusion. In fact, the monster appears to be "interstitial" (or self-contradictory), in Carroll's terms in "The Nature of Horror," in several ways. The monster is alive and dead, a giant and not a giant, a man and not a man, and one and many men and beasts, all at once. And yet, for all his disturbing ambiguity, he is unambiguously and absolutely hideous, and this hideousness alone renders him a monster. As Bloom writes, "a beautiful 'monster' or even a passable one, would not have been a monster" (Bloom, 7; see also Gigante, 568).

According to Aristotle in *Physics* II.8, a monster is a mistake made by nature in forming an animal. As Aristotle writes, "monstrosities will be failures in the purposive effort" (Aristotle, vol. 1, 199<sup>b</sup>4, 340). Frankenstein's original purpose, as he recalls (at the end of the novel), was to make a "rational animal," using the traditional Aristotelian language: "When I reflected on the work I had completed, no less a one than the creation of a sensitive and rational animal, I could not rank myself with the herd of common projectors" (Shelley, 204). "In a fit of enthusiastic madness, I created a rational creature," Frankenstein again recalls (209). But Frankenstein's neglect of beauty undermines this original purpose of forming a "rational animal" or "rational creature." To be a rational creature one must develop one's reason with others and live with others in society. But the monster cannot be recognized aesthetically as a man, so he cannot live in society, and therefore cannot be human. But Frankenstein's deformation of the artificial man also deforms society, and even nature as a whole. A man is a whole of parts, but a man is also a part of the whole of society, and this whole of society is itself a part of the whole of nature. So, by deranging the parts of the artificial man, Frankenstein deranges the whole man, and, by deranging the whole man, Frankenstein deranges the social practices of recognition foundational to society (for none can behold the artificial man except in terror and disgust), and by deranging the whole of society, Frankenstein further deranges nature itself, nature which acts for the beautiful in all her parts and wholes. As Aristotle writes in *Parts of Animals* I.5,

Every realm of nature is marvellous: and as Heraclitus, when the strangers who came to visit him found him warming himself at the furnace in the kitchen and hesitated to go in, is reported to have bidden them not to be afraid to enter, as even in that kitchen divinities were present, so we should venture on the study of every kind of animal without distaste; for each and all will reveal to us something natural and something beautiful. Absence of haphazard and conduciveness of everything to an end are to be found in nature's works in the highest degree, and the end for which those works are put together and produced is a form of the beautiful. (Aristotle, vol. 1, 645<sup>a</sup>16–25, 1004)

Ralph Waldo Emerson echoes this view in *Nature*: “The ancient Greeks called the world *κόσμος*, beauty” (Emerson, 12). Every form of nature reveals the beautiful through its “absence of haphazardness” (elegance), but the monster is inelegant in the extreme because his form is a study in haphazardness and distortion. But if nature forms in all her parts the beautiful, and the parts together form a whole which also reveals a form of the beautiful (to be contemplated philosophically), then a gigantic and terrifyingly hideous man also appears to distort the whole of nature. That anyway appears to be the way Frankenstein sees the monster.

#### **4. Viktor Frankenstein on the Beautiful and the Sublime**

Despite his early blindness to the power of beauty in nature, Frankenstein retreats from society to the mountains to behold their wondrous beauty, and ultimately to forget himself and his terrible act against nature. Frankenstein records a marvelous scene.

The immense mountains and precipices that overhung me on every side – the sound of the river raging among the rocks, and the dashing of the waterfalls around, spoke of a power mighty as Omnipotence – and I ceased to fear, or to bend before any being less almighty than that which created and ruled the elements, here displayed in their most terrific guise. Still, as I ascended higher, the valley assumed a more magnificent and astonishing character. Ruined castles hanging on the precipices of piny mountains; the impetuous Arve, and cottages every here and there peeping forth from among the trees, formed a scene of singular beauty. But it was augmented and rendered sublime by the mighty Alps, whose white and shining pyramids and domes towered above all, as belonging to another earth, the habitations of another race of beings. (Shelley, 91)

The mad scientist who built the most hideous and disgusting thing in the world would appear to be terribly disturbed and incapable of aesthetic sensitivity or refined aesthetic judgment. But now Frankenstein describes the surrounding mountains and castles with penetrating aesthetic perception, almost like a philosophical art critic of otherworldly architecture. In fact, Frankenstein beholds the whole stunningly beautiful scene with the self-sufficient and complete contemplative aesthetic pleasure of Aristotle's philosopher in the *Nicomachean Ethics* X.4, and even the superhuman intellectual pleasure of Aristotle's godlike philosopher in the *Nicomachean Ethics* X.7–8. Yet Frankenstein's description also

bears stunning resemblance to Kant's study of mountains, cliffs, waterfalls, and lightning, as examples of sublimity in nature, in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Here Kant writes,

Bold, overhanging, as it were threatening cliffs, thunder clouds towering up into the heavens, bringing with them flashes of lightning and crashes of thunder, volcanoes with their all-destroying violence, hurricanes with the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean set into a rage, a lofty waterfall on a mighty river, etc., make our capacity to resist into an insignificant trifle in comparison with their power. (Kant, 2001, 5: 261, 144)

As Kant describes "Bold, overhanging, as it were threatening cliffs," Frankenstein describes "The immense mountains and precipices that overhung me on every side." And as Kant describes "the boundless ocean set into a rage," and "a lofty waterfall on a mighty river," Frankenstein describes "the sound of the river raging among the rocks, and the dashing of the waterfalls around."

At first, Frankenstein beholds the mountains as sublime, but then his attention turns to the beautiful castles, and then returns to the mountains—seemingly carrying the concept of dwelling back through analogy through the imagination—to behold the mountains now as sublimely beautiful "white and shining pyramids," apparently crafted by the superhuman hands of "another race of beings" from "another earth." Frankenstein then returns his perception to the beautiful castles, which now appear to be informed by the sublime beauty of the superhuman dwellings, i.e., the mountains. The beautiful castles have been "rendered sublime by the mighty Alps," as the sublime Alps have been rendered beautiful by the "ruined castles." The beauty of the castles, and the sublimity of the mountains, each at first appears distinct, but then synthesize (in Frankenstein's imagination) to form one complete and self-sufficient aesthetic experience of sublime beauty. The beauty of the castles is not separate from the sublimity of the mountains, and the castles as dwellings are not essentially different from the mountains, which also appear as dwellings. The sublime beauty of the mountains is superhuman, and the mountains themselves are superhuman dwellings, and Frankenstein now imagines himself (and even believes himself) to be one of the superhuman craftsmen of these "white and shining pyramids." Once blind to beauty, Frankenstein now appears deeply philosophically reflective and acutely sensitive to the richly textured transitions in his aesthetic field, from natural sublimity, to grand human beauty, to superhuman sublimity, finally to the whole experience as one of superhuman sublime beauty.

While Frankenstein's aesthetics of mountains bears close resemblance to Kant's study of the sublime, seemingly synthesized with Aristotle's aesthetics of the beautiful, Longinus's aesthetics in *On the Sublime*, the first major statement on the sublime, also appears deeply to inform the analysis in *Frankenstein*. Longinus writes in *On the Sublime* that "the Sublime consists in a consummate excellence and distinction of language, and that this alone gave to the greatest poets and prose writers their preeminence and clothed them with immortal fame" (Longinus, 163). Longinus's main examples are Plato and Homer for their superhuman voices of philosophy and poetry overwhelming the world with genius. Of

course, Plato himself in the *Ion* already identifies the superhuman voice of Homer to be the voice of the Muse speaking through him, and overwhelming all of Greece.

In this more than anything, then, I think, the god is showing us, so that we should be in no doubt about it, that these beautiful poems are not human, not even *from* human beings, but are divine and from gods; that poets are nothing but representatives of the gods, possessed by whoever possesses them. (Plato, 534d–e, 942)

Homer himself claims no less, beginning the *Iliad* channeling the Muse: “Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus’ son Achilles and its devastation” (Homer, I, 59). But the superhumanity of the *Iliad* is multifold, for the Muse sings through Homer, rendering him a unique superhuman medium, who thereby sings superhumanly of a range of superhuman beings. As Longinus writes, “Homer has done his best to make the men in the *Iliad* gods and the gods men” (Longinus, 189). Homer’s sublime soaring song of godlike men like Achilles, and manlike gods like Zeus, sets the *Iliad* high above the range of mere mortals. But perhaps the greatest power of the *Iliad* (or any truly sublime literary work) is to cause the reader to feel elation at the thought she herself is somehow the superhuman author of this work. As Longinus writes, “For the true sublime naturally elevates us: uplifted with a sense of proud exaltation, we are filled with joy and pride, as if we had ourselves produced the very thing we heard” (Longinus, 179). This wonderful experience is exactly Frankenstein’s experience beholding the mountains and glaciers and castles in sublime exaltation as if he among the alien craftsmen had created all before him. Frankenstein feels as if he were a superhuman maker of superhumanly beautiful and sublime things, and not the inhuman maker of the dead yellow eyes of a walking corpse. His experience is perfect.

Frankenstein’s study of the beautiful and the sublime also bears resemblance to Santayana’s aesthetics in *The Sense of Beauty: Being the Outlines of Aesthetic Theory* (1896). As Santayana writes, “the sublime is not the ugly, as some descriptions of it might lead us to suppose; it is the supremely, the intoxicatingly beautiful” (Santayana, 151). Here Santayana defines the sublime as superhuman beauty (having already defined beauty as “pleasure objectified”), and categorically excludes ugliness from beauty and sublimity. Santayana also describes the experience of the sublime in quite Longinian terms, as entailing the identification of the reader or beholder with superhuman things or beings.

The surprised enlargement of vision, the sudden escape from our ordinary interests and the identification of ourselves with something permanent and superhuman, something much more abstract and inalienable than our changing personality, all this carries us away from the private tragedies before us, and raises us into a sort of ecstasy. (Santayana, 152–153)

Frankenstein similarly describes his sublime experience as carrying him away from his private tragedy, by power of enlargement of experience, and a corresponding identification with “something permanent and superhuman,” in Santayana’s terms, namely, the race of gods and the icy pyramids they built, and the “ever-moving glacier” which fills Frankenstein with “sublime ecstasy” (Shelley, 93–94). In Longinus’s terms, Frankenstein

feels “uplifted with a sense of proud exaltation,” as if he himself built the icy mountain pyramids. This feeling of “proud exaltation” is exactly the feeling Frankenstein sought in producing the artificial man, and only this feeling (in the mountains) can make him truly forget what he actually produced in the laboratory.

### 5. The Monster in the Mountains

Frankenstein feels calm and at home in the sublime mountains. But while contemplating the icy pyramids and stormy weather and his own corresponding emotions, suddenly Frankenstein's aesthetic experience shatters and melts: “I suddenly beheld the figure of a man, at some distance, advancing towards me with superhuman speed. He bounded over the crevices in the ice, among which I had walked with caution” (Shelley, 95). The monster runs and jumps over vast crevices in the snow as if he were formed by nature (rather than science) to master this treacherous wilderness of glacier and mountain. “He approached; his countenance bespoke bitter anguish, combined with disdain and malignity, while its unearthly ugliness rendered it almost too horrible for human eyes” (95). Previously Frankenstein contemplated castles and mountains too wondrously beautiful for human eyes, but now the monster, “too horrible for human eyes,” blinds Frankenstein to beauty and sublimity with loathing.

Some may suggest the appearance of the monster merely transforms (rather than destroys) the sublimity of the mountains for Frankenstein, because ugliness (so some claim) can be sublime. For example, prior to *Frankenstein*, Burke allows for the aesthetic pleasure of the sublimely ugly, in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. As Burke writes, “Ugliness I imagine ... to be consistent enough with an idea of the sublime. But I would by no means insinuate that ugliness of itself is a sublime idea, unless united with such qualities as excite a strong terror” (Burke, 109). For Burke, the reason ugliness must be so extreme as to be terrifying in order to be sublime is that terror is the essence of the sublime, a definition somewhat recalling Aristotle's aesthetics of terror in the *Poetics*. As Burke writes, “Indeed, terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime” (Burke, 54). Of course, in *Frankenstein* the monster's ugliness incites terror, so apparently the monster's appearance would determine the judgment of the sublime. But the monster's ugliness is so disturbingly disgustingly terrifying that it always incites loathing, and loathing destroys aesthetic pleasure completely. As Kant writes in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, “only one kind of ugliness cannot be represented in a way adequate to nature without destroying all aesthetic satisfaction, hence beauty in art, namely, that which arouses loathing” (Kant, 2001, 5: 312, 190). In *Frankenstein* the monster's ugliness unavoidably and immediately arouses loathing, and therefore “destroys all aesthetic satisfaction,” and therefore undermines the possibility of sublimity.

By undermining all possible aesthetic pleasure, the monster also determines in the mind of the beholder a judgment of the evil. According to Santayana in *The Sense of Beauty*,

That we are endowed with the sense of beauty is a pure gain which brings no evil with it. When the ugly ceases to be amusing or merely uninteresting and becomes

disgusting, it becomes indeed a positive evil: but a moral and practical, not an æsthetic one. (Santayana, 33)

For Santayana, sublimity is beauty perfected, and beauty carries no pain or evil, no negativity, so sublimity can carry no pain, e.g., from terror. Beauty and sublimity, for Santayana (against Burke), are unmixed with pain or evil or ugliness. Santayana returns to this point later in *The Sense of Beauty*, referring to “that part of our definition of beauty which declares that the values beauty contains are all positive” (Santayana, 151). By contrast, according to Santayana, the ugly may be “amusing” or “interesting,” but when the ugly becomes extreme, in the form of the disgusting, then the ugly leaves the sphere of the aesthetic, and enters the sphere of the practical (or moral), and becomes “evil,” and this is exactly what happens in *Frankenstein*. The monster, by appearance alone “more hideous than belongs to humanity” (Shelley, 73), leaves the sphere of the aesthetic, and enters the sphere of the practical to determine a judgment of “positive evil,” in Santayana’s sense, rendering the monster a “filthy daemon” (Shelley, 73). But the monster’s aesthetic appearance, forcing the practical judgment of the filthy or the evil, also forces the further ontological judgment of inhumanity, and this aesthetic-practical-ontological judgment of inhumanity also entails a strange kind of contradiction. On the one hand, the monster bears the general shape of a man, and he possesses the species-defining traits of reason and human emotion. On the other hand, none can recognize him as a man or identify with him as another because of his hideous form. The monster is both human and not human, and while society may fail to grasp this contradiction philosophically its members cannot fail to solve it practically by exile or death.

Frankenstein yells at the monster: “Begone, vile insect! or rather, stay, that I may trample you to dust!” (Shelley, 96). The monster is unsurprised by Frankenstein’s reaction: “‘I expected this reception, said the daemon.’ All men hate the wretched; how, then, must I be hated, who am miserable beyond all living things!” (96). If the monster’s inhuman appearance once seemed consistent with his prelinguistic “inarticulate sounds,” that same appearance now strikingly contrasts with his articulate and even eloquent voice, as he speaks philosophically in universals and particulars. Frankenstein, by contrast, is suddenly insane with hatred and horror: “Abhorred monster!” “Wretched devil!” (96). The shock of horror and hatred seems to derange the intoxicating philosophical contemplation of the mountains and valley and glacier, and even appears to derange Frankenstein’s judgment of magnitude. The sight of the monster is so aesthetically horrible that it seems even to distort the foundations of human reason, as if judgment (and possibly the whole higher power of reason) were ultimately grounded in taste. Previously Frankenstein imagined himself a giant like the giants who built the icy pyramids and laid the glacier gently between them, a giant alone in the mountains, at home in the mountains. But then the comparatively tiny monster appears, and somewhat like Medusa aesthetically stuns Frankenstein’s intellect so that he cannot break free of his self-image as a giant. Newly enraged but apparently still thinking himself a giant, Frankenstein even threatens to “trample” the monster as if it were some “vile insect” crawling the floors of superhuman castles and pyramids made by gods and giants like Frankenstein himself.

Irrationally Frankenstein attacks the monster, but the monster casually steps aside and calmly proceeds to instruct the so-called man of knowledge on the futility of violence: "Remember, thou hast made me more powerful than thyself; my height is superior to thine, my joints more supple. But I will not be tempted to set myself in opposition to thee" (Shelley, 96). The monster seems to understand that his very appearance deranges the judgment of others, and yet he speaks still rationally and even fatherly on the immorality of violence: "You purpose to kill me. How dare you sport thus with life?" (96). Frankenstein would crush the monster like an insect, without thought of the insect's humanity, but the monster charges him with immorality for violence even against life itself. But after the monster scolds Frankenstein for violence, as if Frankenstein were the monster's son, the monster reminds Frankenstein that he is the monster's father. The monster says, "Remember, that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed" (96-97). The roles of the monster and the man now appear to be completely reversed. The father has become a rash and irrational child, and the child a wise and fatherly man. The natural philosopher has become a violent monster, and the monster a reflective philosopher. As Bloom writes, "The greatest paradox and most astonishing achievement of Mary Shelley's novel is that the monster is *more human* than his creator" (Bloom, 4).

The monster says he lives in the caves of these mountains: "The desert mountains and dreary glaciers are my refuge. I have wandered here many days; the caves of ice, which I only do not fear, are a dwelling to me, and the only one which man does not grudge" (Shelley, 97). Earlier Frankenstein beheld the ruined castles as beautiful, and the mountains as sublime dwellings crafted by a higher race of beings, and found these sublime dwellings to render the castles sublime, and himself a giant dwelling amidst these superhuman pyramids. But now the hideous monster claims these superhuman dwellings to be his home, thereby presumably rendering in the mind of Frankenstein the mountains and glacier and castles as hideous and horrible as the monster himself. If the monster were a man and not a monster, a man who had left society to live alone in a mountain cave or a ruined mountain castle to become a philosopher king of ice and sky, then Frankenstein might think the hermit godlike and sublime, and this sublimity even to augment the sublime beauty of the mountains. As Kant writes in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, "To be self-sufficient, hence not to need society, yet without being unsociable, i.e., fleeing it, is something that comes close to the sublime, just like any superiority over needs" (Kant, 5: 275, 157). History and literature present several examples of the sublime hermit in the wilderness, e.g., the wizard Merlin in the forest in the legend of King Arthur, Henry David Thoreau in his cabin in the woods by Walden Pond, and Zarathustra in his mountain cave in Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, each of whom by his presence augments the sublimity of the wilderness. But the monster in *Frankenstein*, while physically self-sufficient, is not superior to the needs of society, and by his presence in the mountains degrades the mountains, and degrades nature as a whole.

## 6. The Monster's Philosophy

Once Frankenstein's mind stabilizes and adjusts, the monster proceeds to unfold his life story. After his abandonment the monster left civilization and entered the wilderness and learned about nature from experience. The monster explains that he learned to speak by observing the inhabitants of a cottage and imitating their vocal gestures, this power of imitation being natural to all human minds. As Aristotle writes in *Poetics* 4, "Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation" (Aristotle, vol. 2, 1448<sup>b</sup>5–9, 2318). Once inside language the monster understands that this "godlike science" of language defines humanity (Shelley, 108). As Aristotle writes in *Nicomachean Ethics* X.7, "intellect more than anything else is man" (Aristotle, vol. 2, 1178<sup>a</sup>7–8, 1862). Yet with his increasing understanding of the "godlike science," the monster feels an increasing desire to enter the village, to be with others.

"... I easily perceived that, although I eagerly longed to discover myself to the cottagers, I ought not to make the attempt until I had first become master of their language; which knowledge might enable me to make them overlook the deformity of my figure; for with this also the contrast perpetually presented to my eyes had made me acquainted." (Shelley, 110)

As the monster studies the magical language of the villagers, he knows himself to be one of them. But as the monster beholds their magically beautiful forms, he knows himself to be horribly different. As the monster recalls, "I had admired the perfect forms of my cottagers – their grace, beauty, and delicate complexions: but was I terrified, when I viewed myself in a transparent pool!" (110). Narcissus in Greek mythology beholds his reflection in a pool of water and cannot bear to look away and falls in love and cannot even bear to live if the pool be only a reflection. But when the monster beholds his reflection in a pool he cannot bear to see it and can barely bear to live knowing others see it too. Joyce Carol Oates, in "Frankenstein's Fallen Angel," finds this scene of the mirror pool to be a reflection, not on Narcissus, but on Eve in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (lines 456–66). Oates writes,

When the demon terrifies himself by seeing his reflection in a pool, and grasping at once the nature of his own deformity, he is surely not mirroring Narcissus, as some commentators have suggested, but Milton's Eve in her surprised discovery of her own beauty, in book 4 of *Paradise Lost*. (Oates, 547)

Oates is right to highlight the scene of Eve beholding her reflection, especially considering that *Paradise Lost* informs *Frankenstein* from beginning to end, beginning with an epigraph from the epic (Shelley, 1).

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

PARADISE LOST.

But perhaps reflections of both Narcissus and Eve appear in the monster's description of the pool, for the monster throughout his dialogue seems to see himself in the whole of European history and literature, as if that tradition were itself a kind of mind, like "the mind of Europe" in T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and Individual Talent" (Eliot, 39, 43). As the monster sees himself visually in the mirror of the pool, he sees himself intellectually in the mirror of the mind of Europe, which includes Narcissus and Milton's Eve.

In any case, the monster now presents the problem of his unique form of self-consciousness arising from these two opposed self-images. On the one hand, he is the hideous and gigantic monster he sees in the pool who terrifies and disgusts all, including himself. On the other hand, he is a rational (and highly intelligent) creature reasoning about being a rational creature, but also reasoning about being a hideous and gigantic monster, and reasoning about the opposition of these two self-images. But reason is intrinsically social and intersubjective, so rational creatures must live in society with others who recognize themselves in one another. But the monster cannot enter society because he is inhumanly hideous and gigantic. Yet he must enter society if he is to become part of society. So the monster forms a rational solution to his aesthetic problem. He knows humanity defines itself by reason rather than physical appearance, so if he can master their "godlike science," then they should (in principle) embrace him, even if with difficulty. After all, human beings, the monster believes, cannot be so shallow as his reflection in the pool. Their intellects and their love must be infinitely deep.

"I looked upon them as superior beings, who would be the arbiters of my future destiny. I formed in my imagination a thousand pictures of presenting myself to them, and their reception of me. I imagined that they would be disgusted, until, by my gentle demeanour and conciliating words, I should first win their favour, and afterwards their love." (Shelley, 111)

The monster plots to offset humanity's natural revulsion with warmth and gentility and flowing eloquence, for that is all the beauty he can offer.

But this first strategy is fundamentally flawed. As the monster recalls, "I did not yet entirely know the fatal effects of this miserable deformity" (110). The monster discovers he was wrong about humanity because humanity is wrong about itself. Humanity defines itself as rational but unconsciously maintains an invisible but very real aesthetic and ontological perimeter around itself. This perimeter preserves the beauty of all its forms and practices and excludes by unspoken standards of taste what threatens aesthetic uniformity. So long as man remains with man and woman, and society holds each in rapture of each and all, no man can truly see himself. But a man like the monster, completely aesthetically removed, may yet see and know himself a man (and not a man), may yet see taste beneath reason, informing reason, and demanding beauty. Humanity is blind to this unity of taste and ontology within itself, and therefore blind to itself, but the monster has no choice and sees it. He sees it in the pool. Beauty, the monster now knows, bewitches all men and women, and makes them men and women.

If the monster's philosophical conclusions seem extreme in their opposition to Aristotle's definition of man and woman as the "rational animals," Aristotle himself in *Politics* I.2 also draws an invisible perimeter around the state excluding certain rational creatures.

Hence it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. And he who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state, is either a bad man or above humanity; he is like the

*Tribeless, lawless, hearthless one,*

whom Homer denounces—the natural outcast is forthwith a lover of war; he may be compared to an isolated piece at draughts. (Aristotle, vol. 2, 1253<sup>a</sup>2–6, 1988–1989)

The state is a natural whole, and all men and women are linguistic and political parts of this whole, but the bad man or monstrous man or godlike man can be no part of the state, and each instead appears as a lone piece in a game without a board. Aristotle again draws the perimeter of the state when he writes in *Politics* I.2, "he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god: he is no part of the state" (Aristotle, vol. 2, 1253<sup>a</sup>27–30, 1988). Kant in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* seems to have in mind this same view of the self-sufficient demigod, in describing the sublimely self-sufficient hermit in the woods. Later in *Politics* III.13 Aristotle writes, if a "god among men" were to appear in the state, then he or she must be assassinated, or exiled, or crowned absolute monarch, this last solution being Aristotle's preferred solution, and even his ideal state (cf. *Politics* III.17 and VII.14; see also *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.1, 1145<sup>a</sup>15–27, 1809–1810). The monster of *Frankenstein* appears to be a distorted mirror image of Aristotle's "god among men," a superhuman monster who can be no part of society, and who must live in exile in the wilderness, lest Frankenstein or another assassinate him; and yet, apparently, the monster himself would be king of his own domain if only he had a queen by his side.

The monster knows he can be no part of human society, and painfully beholds the happiness he would enjoy if only he had been designed with love instead of pride: "Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded" (Shelley, 97). The monster is distraught. "Was I, then, a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled and whom all men disowned?" (117). The monster knows humanity will always identify him as a blot on existence, but somehow he refuses that definition and instead returns to inquiry into his nature, a very human thing to do.

"My person was hideous and my stature gigantic. What did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them." (125)

The questions the monster poses, "Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come?" are questions all rational creatures pose. But they pose these questions because they are rational creatures among other rational creatures. The monster poses these same questions because he is a rational creature who cannot be recognized as a rational creature, and therefore cannot live as a rational creature. The contradiction is maddening.

"I exclaimed in agony. 'Accursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even *you* turned from me in disgust? God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance. Satan had his companions, fellow-devils, to admire and encourage him; but I am solitary and abhorred.'" (126)

Frankenstein once imagined his creation to be the first of many who would love and honor their creator: "A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me" (Shelley, 52). Now the opposite has transpired as the monster curses his creator for forming a being more hideous than Dante's demons, more hideous precisely for the monster's "very resemblance" to humanity, and for that eternally alone. Even Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost* enjoyed the honor and friendship of the fallen angels, but perhaps even they would find the monster unthinkably hideous and form for him a separate prison in the depths of Pandemonium. A friend is "another self," writes Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.4 (Aristotle, vol. 2, 1169<sup>b</sup>3–10, 1848), but because the monster has no other aesthetic self he can have no friend, and because he can have no friend he can never be happy or fully a man.

G. W. F. Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* claims a reflective self-consciousness is an "'I' that is 'We' and 'We' that is 'I'" (Hegel, 110). The monster of *Frankenstein* is both an "I" and a "we" because he is an individually embodied being in language (which is social), but paradoxically he cannot be a "we" because there are no others like him, and therefore he cannot be a fully reflective "I." Faced with the impossibility of recognition by humanity, the monster formulates his second solution to his problem. The monster can be another self and an "I" and a "we" but only if his other self is another monster. So the monster makes his demand of Frankenstein: "You must create a female for me, with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being. This you alone can do" (Shelley, 140). The monster also demands Frankenstein make the female monster similarly gigantic and hideous: "My companion must be of the same species, and have the same defects" (139). The monster still recognizes himself as a rational creature, but now also distinguishes his species "monster" from the species "human," and on aesthetic grounds alone.

Frankenstein naturally resists, thinking another monster would be another malicious monster, but the monster illuminates the cause of his malice: "I am malicious because I am miserable" (140). Why should the monster respect men and women of society if they despise him for his ugliness when he would love and protect them should they extend him the slightest kindness? The monster says,

"Shall I respect man when he contemns me? Let him live with me in the interchange of kindness; and, instead of injury I would bestow every benefit upon him with tears of gratitude at his acceptance. But that cannot be; the human senses are insurmountable barriers to our union." (140)

The senses beholding aesthetic horror determine a judgment of inhumanity and undermine immediately any potential recognition of the monster as human. The human senses alone simultaneously and paradoxically define and exclude the monster from his nature, and

thereby cause his misery and ultimately his malice. The monster acknowledges his bad actions but also instructs Frankenstein that any man in such condition must be a bad man, and yet even a monster might be a good man if allowed to live in peace with a woman who loves him.

“If I have no ties and no affections, hatred and vice must be my portion; the love of another will destroy the cause of my crimes, and I shall become a thing of whose existence every one will be ignorant. 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.” (142)

If only he would construct a female monster, says the monster, then Frankenstein would never have to behold his creations again, no one would, because the two monsters would flee Europe for the wilderness of the new world and live their lives in secret and peace. The monster says, “The picture I present to you is peaceful and human, and you must feel that you could deny it only in the wantonness of power and cruelty” (141). The monster, so human in so many ways, appeals to Frankenstein’s deepest sense of humanity, even as a son to a father.

Frankenstein appreciates the apparent rationality of the solution to the problem, and even reluctantly begins, but he who once lacked foresight now clearly sees the future. The monsters may flee Europe to live quietly and peacefully in the wilderness of the new world, but they will not die alone in that wilderness. They will want children, and their children will want children. This monstrous Adam and Eve will populate the wilderness with monsters, and these monsters will eventually return to civilization. Frankenstein considers this future in language recalling Kant’s image of the “race of devils” or “nation of devils” in “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch” (Kant, 1995, 112).

“Even if they were to leave Europe, and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror.” (Shelley, 160)

Later and again speaking as a practical (and somewhat utilitarian) philosopher Frankenstein recalls his decision to deny his artificial son happiness.

“My duties towards the beings of my own species had greater claims to my attention, because they included a greater proportion of happiness or misery. Urged by this view, I refused, and I did right in refusing, to create a companion for the first creature.” (209)

If initially he failed to grasp beauty as fundamental to humanity’s self-understanding, Frankenstein at last understands the foundational importance of preserving the aesthetic-ontological perimeter of humanity against the hideous and the monstrous and the disgusting. If once he hoped to stand godlike to a new race of beings, Frankenstein ultimately stands fast for all humanity against the monster’s happiness, however human he may be.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a rich literary investigation of humanity's self-understanding, and a subtle philosophical argument against the classical and longstanding Aristotelian definition of man and woman as rational animals. Shelley's greatest achievement in *Frankenstein* is to reveal this ethereal self-image to be a mask crafted and upheld unconsciously by society throughout history, and then to lift this glittering mask of reason, thereby revealing the true nature of humanity to be beauty and love of beauty. Instead of the godlike animals inhabiting the pure realm of reason, men and women are, in fact, the godlike animals charmed and transfixed by the ethereal beauty of nature in all its forms, in all its forests and roses and butterflies and leopards and wolves, in all their splendor and elegance and grace of form, the aesthetic animals enamored and bewitched by the superhuman sublimity of mountains and glaciers and stars, and above all one another, especially their eyes.



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