

The Posthuman that Could Have Been Mary Shelley's Creature

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ABSTRACT

At the very core of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, the Creature meets his maker, acquaints him – and, consequently, the reader – with the narrative of his miserable life, and entreats him to make a female companion with whom he can share his life. Although Victor admits to having been moved by the Creature's eloquence and fine sensations, he reluctantly succumbs to his plea only to destroy the female before completing her, afraid that this new species might pose a threat to the survival of his own. In the encounter of these two species, however, only one seems to have truly "met" the other: the Creature has indeed become with his maker in a way that Victor fails. Given that the dominant narrative point of view up until that moment had been Victor's, readers of the novel have the opportunity of having their ignorance enriched regarding the Creature straight from the Other's mouth, this multiple narrative thus enabling them to take Victor's creation as far more than the monster he sees. Indeed, I would argue that readers do "meet" the Creature while his creator cannot. Taking this central part of the novel as a starting point, this essay will explore the coexistence of transhuman and posthuman discourses in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, working mainly with the 1818 text. In expressing his desire to create an improved species, rendering "man invulnerable to any but a violent death", Victor echoes the transhuman discourses of improvement of the human race, while remaining of this transitory stage, unable to make the transition to the posthuman phase which would grant humanness to his Creature, irrespective of his appearance. In failing to do so, I will explore whether he is also preventing the Creature to become truly posthuman.

Keywords: Mary Shelley, romantic prometheanism, transhumanism, monstrosity, Emmanuel Levinas, radical alterity, posthumanism, romantic vitalism, English romanticism and natural sciences.

In the central pages of the book that brought him to life, away from the traditional accoutrements furnished by the film industry, Victor Frankenstein's Creature speaks to his maker, eloquently rendering the account

of his miserable life and demanding of him the creation of a female companion. This pivotal moment in the narrative is decisive for the turn and denouement of the plot; if Victor gives in to the Creature's demands the novel might have had the happy ending of classical comedies, with the resolution of the conflict and the celebration of life symbolically marked by the type of union – usually a marriage – that brings the characters into a state of harmony. For a short while, indeed, the plot takes that direction, only to end as the tragedy we all know. In identifying the flaw in Frankenstein that brings about the tragic ending, I refuse to read the novel following the insisted upon opinion that Mary Shelley was “warning against tampering with human nature” (Weaver 2010, 3), which I find reduces the story to a morality tale. I choose, instead, to locate the hero's harmartia not in his scientific zeal, but in his inability to “become with” his creature, in his obstinate refusal to locate his humanness, which blinds Victor to any possibility of considering the Creature worthy of ethical consideration. It is my contention that had the Creature been more easily classified as belonging to the human species, Frankenstein might not have any qualms in accepting him as an ethical subject. But the Creature's nature remains in a liminal state that leaves him outside the scope of Levinas's ethics of alterity. Posthuman ethics are the way to expand Levinas's ethics beyond the posthuman and grant the Creature the ethical status he deserves.

1. FRANKENSTEIN'S DREAM OF THE POSTHUMAN

Popular culture has simplified the ethical issues explored in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) to such an extent that the story has often been reduced to “a mixture of gothic melodrama and black farce” (Holmes 2008, 335), with Victor Frankenstein as the archetypical mad, evil scientist, and the Creature as the robotic, zombie-like being whose strength and fury have to be kept under control, if not destroyed. Yet, Mary Shelley's characters are far from being conceived as flat, stock villains. The Creature, indeed, is “the most articulate person in the whole novel” (Holmes 2008, 328), while Victor's scientific endeavours are purportedly guided by a firm desire to benefit humanity, to “banish disease from the human frame, and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death” (Shelley 1996, 22)¹. As a true son of his time, a rational humanist, Victor trusts that science can play a decisive role in bringing about the perpetual progress of the human species,

¹ From this moment onwards, when understood from the context, only the page numbers of the novel will be included in the parenthetical information.

and given that he has had the advantage of receiving the education that enables him to contribute to that progress, he feels his duty, as a modern Prometheus, to “pour a torrent of light in our dark world” (32).

In the context of what Richard Holmes has called *The Age of Wonder*, that is, “the second scientific revolution, which swept through Britain at the end of the eighteenth century, and produced a new vision which has rightly been called Romantic science” (2008, XV), and considering that the conception and composition of *Frankenstein* coincided with the Vitalism debate of 1816-20, it is not difficult to appraise the novel as a “thought experiment” based on the works of scientists Humphry Davy, Erasmus Darwin, Luigi Galvani, and Giovanni Aldini (Mellor 2003, 17-8). However, when reading the novel almost two hundred years later, it is practically impossible not to detect traces of the discourses that inform transhumanist (and posthumanist) theories. This does not mean that Mary Shelley was a transhumanist *avant la lettre*, but corroborates Bostrom’s (2005, 2) and Ferrando’s (2013, 27) shared opinion that the roots of transhumanism are to be found in the rational humanism of the Enlightenment.

Mary Shelley certainly shared with many of her contemporaries – including her father and her husband – an interest in the idea of the perpetual progress of humanity, exploring in the novel the possibilities of using technology to this end, a notion – that of human enhancement through technology– which is crucial to transhumanist reflection (Ferrando 2013, 27). Alongside Isaac Newton, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Immanuel Kant, Bostrom points at the Marquis de Condorcet as one influential figure in “form[ing] the basis for rational humanism” (Bostrom 2005, 2). Mary Shelley’s journals provide evidence that she had read his biography on Voltaire but leave no trace of her having read his most influential work: *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*². Yet, the similarities between Condorcet’s and *Frankenstein*’s wordings of their respective dreams are glaring:

Would it be absurd now to suppose that the improvement of the human race should be regarded as capable of unlimited progress? That a time will come when death would result only from extraordinary accidents or the more and more gradual wearing out of vitality, and that, finally, the duration of the average interval between birth and wearing out has itself no specific limit whatsoever? (qtd. in Bostrom 2005, 3)

² The scholarly website *Romantic Circles* offers a list of the books read by Mary Shelley between 1814 and 1844. The list, derived from *The Journals of Mary Shelley: 1814-1844*, edited by Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), can be accessed at <https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/frankenstein/MShelley/reading>.

Condorcet's reflections on the idea of progress – incidentally, in total agreement with William Godwin's on human inventions as capable of perpetual improvement (Godwin 1793, 43-50) – are those upon which Victor acts:

Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs. Pursuing these reflections, I thought, that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time (although I now found it impossible) renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption. (Shelley 1996, 32)

Despite the similarities between the two extracts, I would argue that Condorcet's dream is that of a transhumanist, whereas Frankenstein actually envisages the posthuman. While Condorcet still keeps "the improvement of the human race" at the centre of his discourse (transhumanism being, according to Wolfe [2010, XV], "an *intensification* of humanism") Frankenstein does so only initially. In his earlier aspiration to render man "invulnerable to anything but violent death", Victor was indeed contemplating just a technologically enhanced human being. However, the quotation above states very clearly that he is actually conceiving of "a *new species*" (emphasis added), one which would allegedly owe its happiness and excellence to him. The being that Frankenstein succeeds in bringing to life is no longer a transitional one, but constitutes an evolutionary leap resulting from "an elaborate circumvention of normal heterosexual procreation" (Homans 1986, 101), while Condorcet's visualises an enhanced *homo sapiens*, a category in which no character in the novel sees fit to include the Creature, including the Creature himself.

The reader gets a first glimpse of Frankenstein's progeny in the framing narrative provided by Robert Walton. His liminal, hybrid nature is already hinted at when Walton describes him as "a being which had the shape of a man, but apparently of gigantic structure" (13). The next morning, however, he seems to have concluded that what he had seen the previous day was indeed a man, given that he introduces Victor as "a human being [...] not, as the other traveller seemed to be, a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island, but an European" (13), and that he confirms to Frankenstein that he had seen "some dogs drawing a sledge, with a man in it, across the ice" (14). Even before getting to know the characters, the reader is struck by the evident contrast between the pursuer and the pursued. Victor Frankenstein is barely alive when he is rescued – in fact, he does not make it to the end of the novel – but the Creature had been seen effortlessly guiding the dogs that drew his sledge, all of them seemingly

in good health, while Frankenstein's had all but one perished. The Creature, indeed, seems to thrive in the natural environment, irrespective of the temperature, almost as if he himself were a force of nature³. His colossal strength, his agility, and his resilience reveal that he is physically superior to the average human being, a trait that he does not fail to observe:

I was not even of the same nature as man. I was more agile than they, and could subsist upon coarser diet; I bore the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to my frame; my stature far exceeded their's. When I looked around, I saw and heard of none like me. Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned? (80-1)

The differences in their physical features leads the Creature to see himself in terms of his alterity, as an other-than-human being, not just because of his appearance but also his constitution. His intelligence also seems to be superior, judging by the fact that he learnt to speak and read at a much faster speed than Safie, the Turkish woman who comes to live with the De Laceys. If we set aside the fact that he has also become a murderer – a big “if”, I am aware – it can even be argued that he is morally superior, too, concerning his dietary choices, no doubt a salute to Percy Shelley's views on vegetarianism, a diet which Mary also adopted. The Creature sees his preferred diet as yet another set of features which sets him apart from the human species:

If you consent, neither you nor any other human being shall ever see us again: I will go to the vast wilds of South America. *My food is not that of man*; I do not destroy the lamb and the kid, to glut my appetite; acorns and berries afford me sufficient nourishment. My companion will be of the same nature as myself, and we will be content with the same fare. We shall make our bed of dried leaves; the sun will shine on us as on man, and will ripen our food. (99; emphasis added)

The Creature's diet and the lifestyle he desires are those of Adam and Eve before the Fall, an idyllic existence which he had come to long for while reading *Paradise Lost*. However, his is not the vegetarianism – veganism, actually – attached to an earlier state of innocence (or even an earlier stage in human evolution), but one that stems from a moral choice: not to cause gratuitous harm in order to satisfy a perfectly dispensable pleasure, as his choice of words evidences.

³ See Mellor (1988, 127-40) for her superb discussion of the moral and aesthetic dimensions of Mary Shelley's conception of nature, and her reading of the encounter with the Creature in terms of the natural sublime.

It becomes apparent that the progeny is physically, intellectually and, at least to a certain degree, morally superior to his maker, The difference between considering his nature transhuman or posthuman resides exclusively in the fact that he can be safely ascribed to a different species, one “whose basic capacities so radically exceed those of present humans as to no longer be unambiguously human by our current standards” (Garreau, qtd. in Wolfe 2010, XIII). Had he been granted his wish of a female companion, he could very well have been not the only, but the first member of this new species.

Frankenstein’s language may be that of the transhumanist at the beginning, but he dreams of the posthuman, a dream which becomes a nightmare – a “catastrophe”, in Victor’s own words (34) – when the Creature comes to life. The face that should have appealed to responsibility fails to do so, not so much because it is not the face of a human, but because, having human features, it does not qualify as such. The face that wakes Victor from his sleep is just a grotesque mockery of the ideal blazon he must have had in mind when he had “selected his features as beautiful” (34). The Creature’s “lustrous, black, and flowing” hair and his “teeth of a pearly whiteness” lose their beauty when contrasted with his “yellow skin”, “watery eyes”, his “shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips” (34). This first face-to-face encounter fails to elicit any empathetic response from Victor; the gaze controls his reaction and renders him literally and metaphorically deaf to the needs of his creation:

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. 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 down stairs. [...] [N]o mortal could support the horror of that countenance. [...] 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. (35)

This is the first of the innumerable occasions on which Frankenstein refers to his Creature as a “monster”, “a word intimately connected with beholding” (Goldstein 2015, 80) and this initial response to the demands of the face irredeemably conditions their relationship. Failing to recognise the face of the Creature as a correlate Other in this first encounter frees Victor from feeling any ethical responsibility towards his progeny; after all, a “monster” does not qualify as an ethical subject. Yet, the Levinasian openness to the Other is not only visual, but also “performatively enunciated through language (a ‘saying’ that is also a doing) that irrefutably exposes

one to the Other” (Bunch 2014, 43). “Speaking”, Levinas writes, “rather than ‘letting be,’ solicits the Other. Speech cuts across vision. [...] The formal structure of language thereby announces the ethical inviolability of the Other and, without any odor of the ‘numinous’, his ‘holiness’” (Levinas 1979, 195). Frankenstein is exposed to the Other in such terms in the central part of the novel.

Unable to transcend the horrors of the exterior, Frankenstein has taken for granted that the interior must be equally horrid, holding no doubts about the identity of William and Justine’s killer even before the Creature confesses to his murders. This second encounter and the confession simply add to his preconceived notions about the Creature’s evil nature, a conviction he maintains even after listening to the entirety of his account.

2. THE FACE OF THE CREATURE, OR THE LIMITS OF LEVINASIAN ETHICS

Even though Mary Shelley might have been hinting at the impossibility of locating this new species within the accepted order of things when she chose not to give Frankenstein’s Creature a name, she did grant his tale the central position in this multiple narrative, framed by Victor’s, which is, in its turn, framed by Walton’s, thus effectively “de-centering the human from the primary focus of the discourse” (Ferrando 2013, 32). The technique of using multiple narrators allows readers to get the same story from different points of view. It is, therefore, to be expected that a new image of the Creature will emanate after reading his side of the story, one that, at least, shows him as something other than a “monster”.

I must admit that I find it very difficult to imagine a reader that remains unmoved by the Creature’s account. His tale is one of utter desolation, of hopes that are crushed the moment that they may appear to materialise, of an emotional pain far more excruciating than any physical ache. His life begins in literal and metaphorical darkness and does not get any better as light pours in; on the contrary, the more aware he becomes of how different he is from anyone he sees, the more he wishes he had never been born. The Creature’s transformation into an articulate being follows to the letter the steps established in Locke’s sensationalism, also elaborated upon by William Godwin. It also agrees with Godwin’s manifest belief that the moral character of a human being originates in his/her perceptions, as exposed in chapter three of his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*. In tune with his views on “perpetual improvement”, the Creature’s evolution begins

with simple perception until it reaches abstraction, “one of the sublimest operations of mind” (1793, 45). He first starts responding to both external and internal stimuli, before moving onto the next step: “[...] that of comparison, or the coupling together of two ideas and the perception of their resemblances and differences. Without comparison”, Godwin adds, “there can be no preference, and without preference no action” (45). Whenever the Creature compares himself to his surroundings, he always finds himself wanting: if he tries to imitate the song of a bird, his voice comes out much hoarser, and when he catches sight of his reflection on the water he fails to see the perfect human form he admires. This is, in fact, the first moment of anagnorisis for the Creature, one of literal recognition, in this case a visual one, in which he recognises himself as an Other. Given that his first reaction to his own reflection on the water is one of horror, he understands why he encounters rejection wherever he goes. Like everyone else he meets, the Creature is also deceived by his own face, whose deformity makes him wonder whether he is indeed a monster, momentarily oblivious to the fact that his secret acts of generosity towards the poor cottagers tell a different story.

The second, more painful moment of anagnorisis, is found in chapter fifteen, when the Creature, having now learnt to read, finally finds the answer to his questions about his origins in Victor’s journal. He now understands that he is, indeed, the only member of his species, and is horrified at learning that all the expectations with which his maker had conceived him came to nothing just because of his physical appearance. The potential of the species Victor heralded as a harbinger of a new era for humankind is unexplored, discarded, simply because it *looks like* a monster. Similarly, the cottagers, who had referred to the invisible face of he who had helped them in their daily chores as that of a good spirit, failed to see it in the being that was imploring to their father, destroying with their beating any hope he may have had of being admitted into the human community.

Since his moral character has been shaped by his life and reading experiences – and given that he has read *Paradise Lost* and not *The Book of Job* – it is almost inevitable that, once he learns about his origins, he turns his anger towards his maker, whom he blames for his miserable existence, which he can only see as tolerable if he could share it with someone of his same species. The demand he places on Frankenstein is the solution he envisions for the two species to live in peace, since coexistence is impossible.

While the face had failed to move Frankenstein, the Creature’s eloquent speech seems to be more effective, as had also happened with blind De Lacey:

His words had a strange effect upon him. I compassionated him, and sometimes felt a wish to console him, but when I looked upon him, when I saw the filthy man that moved and talked, my heart sickened, and my feelings were altered to those of horror and hatred. I tried to stifle these sensations; I thought, that as I could not sympathize with him, I had no right to withhold from him the small portion of happiness which was yet in my power to bestow. (99-100)

Although he admits to the impossibility of sympathising with his creation, this is the first – I would venture, but cannot confirm, the one and only – occasion on which Frankenstein grants him the condition of “man” (even if it is a “filthy” one)⁴. Levinas seems to have been right in considering that speech cuts across vision, and the Creature, like Satan, like Adam, is perfectly able to articulate his plea in terms that cannot render the addressee impassive. However, in the case of the novel that occupies us here, any hint at the possibility of Victor recognising his progeny’s humanness is nothing but a momentary illusion. As the Creature has painfully learnt, “the human senses are insurmountable barriers to our union” (98), and Victor remains conditioned by the evil nature he insists on seeing behind the horrid face. What he said of his first face-to-face encounter with the Creature (“He might have spoken, but I did not hear”) remains true after this second meeting: the Creature does speak but Frankenstein does not listen. Accepting that the miserable existence of the Creature is exclusively his own fault would have meant that he would also have had to acknowledge his share of blame in the deaths of those he loves, and that is something Victor refuses to do. He chooses instead to believe that the Creature *is* innately evil, that his monstrous appearance is the external expression of his corrupted being, and that this evil nature would be perpetuated and pose a threat to humanity if he accepted to grant him a female companion. Imagining this evidently superior species as a “race of devils [who] would be propagated upon the earth, [and] might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror” (114), he designates himself as, once again, saviour of humankind and destroys the female before it is animated, thus denying the Creature any hope for happiness and bringing about his own demise.

⁴ The closer he comes to granting the creature any glimpse of humanness is to be found in his admission that he had created “a sensitive and rational animal” (147). “Abhorred monster” is the preferred one among the many niceties (“wretch”, “devil”, “vile insect”, or “daemon”, to mention but a few) Victor uses to refer to his progeny.

3. THE POSTHUMAN THAT COULD HAVE BEEN

Given that Levinasian ethics “are situated in the *human* face-to-face encounter” (Bunch 2014, 43), and having agreed that the face of the Creature is not that of a human, it is evident that it is his face that prevents *viewers* to grant him ethical status, since those who cannot see it are less reluctant to do so. Levinas coincides with Victor in according priority to the human face, “an especially acute issue for environmentally minded critics” (Perpich 2008, 170), which “raises questions about the subject (via the face) as the proper site for ethics” (Bunch 2014, 43). Nevertheless, Bunch finds a way to “dislodge Levinasian ethics from the limits of the human” (2014, 44) in Levinas himself; more precisely, in his theorisation of his experience with Bobby, the “ethical dog” of concentration camp Stalag XIB, where he was detained, who succeeded in granting the prisoners the human status that not only camp guards but also villagers had deprived them of. Bunch’s use of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “becoming animal” to elaborate upon Levinas’s ethics of alterity prove incredibly useful to discern the epistemological position required to grant the Creature the ethical status it deserves.

Bunch works on Deleuze and Guattari’s estimation that “we are ethical only insofar as we move away from the assimilating ‘horrors’ of the face, which they tie to an aversion to difference” (Bunch 2014, 45), which allows me to confirm the suspicion that the horrific face of the Creature is indeed the impediment to his qualifying as an ethical subject. Their consideration that racism “never detects the particles of the other; it propagates waves of sameness until those who resist identification have been wiped out (or those who only allow themselves to be identified at a given degree of divergence)” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 178) are equally applicable to the type of discrimination the Creature suffers on account of his belonging to an unrecognisable species; a particular type of speciesism, since he looks grotesquely human. It is precisely here, that the concept of becoming animal comes in handy, because it “explicitly expands the field of ethical consideration beyond the human subject” (Bunch 2014, 45).

The concept of “becoming animal” is, indeed, a first step in this expansion but, taken literally, it may be limiting for the text that occupies us since, in the case of the Creature, he does not seem to qualify for the ethical consideration Victor would have possibly given an animal. One can try to “become animal” – since, indeed one *is* an animal – but how does one “become monster”? In the case of the Creature, Frankenstein has to take the position of the reader and do away with the face as a first step to stop seeing the world in perfectly structured, dualistic, hierarchical, anthropo-

centric terms. Only then can he truly “become with” his Creature. If we take the Creature, as indeed we should all other-than-human natures, as members of the “bigger, queer family of companion species” (Haraway 2003, 11) we will be looking at the world in true post-dualistic, post-hierarchical, post-human terms.

Mary Shelley’s critique of romantic Prometheanism anticipates several of the concerns expressed by some twentieth-century schools of thoughts – posthumanism among others – which have paid attention to the role played by “the fundamental dualisms identified by romanticism” in our current environmental problems (Goodbody 2014, 64). Since “posthumanism sees the problem originating in belief in human uniqueness and our exaggeratedly hierarchical relationship with other species” (2014, 64), it seems safe to infer that, had the ethical postulates coming from posthumanism informed Frankenstein’s choices, had he been able to become animal, become other-than-human, become post-human, the ending of the novel might have been a very different one. Mary Bunch’s question whether humanism can provide the cure for dehumanisation (34) can only be answered in the negative. If there is, indeed, a cure, it can only come from posthumanism.

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