“Sorrow only increased with knowledge”:
The Monster’s Desire for Human Relations in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

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In short, love is an affliction.
—Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*¹

While being a constitutive condition of human nature, love remains the incontrovertible premise of our suffering. The more one loves the more one suffers.
—Juan-David Nasio, *The Book of Love and Pain*²

The search for relations is a salient thread running through the fabric of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), insofar as the three main characters, Captain Walton, Victor Frankenstein, and the Monster, all suffer from solitude, or lack of friendship, in the novel. Whilst setting out to explore the unknown polar regions of unsurpassed wonder and beauty, Walton writes to his sister Margaret Saville in a woeful tone: “I have one want which I have never yet been able to satisfy. . . . I have no friend Margaret: when I am glowing with the enthusiasm of success, there will be none to participate my joy; if I am assailed by disappointment, no one will endeavour to sustain me in dejection.”³

Frankenstein, refusing to obey his father’s prohibition, pursues occult science to equip himself with the divine power to bestow life upon inanimate bodies, a demonic ambition that results directly or indirectly in the death of his father, brother, fiancé, and best friend: he mournfully tells Walton towards the end of the novel that “it was during sleep alone that I could taste joy . . . for in sleep I saw my friends, my wife, and my beloved country” (p. 204).

The Monster’s case is different from Walton’s and Frankenstein’s. Walton and Frankenstein can choose to have friendship whenever they would like to, whereas the Monster cannot although endowed with a loving heart⁴: he is outright rejected from human society—i.e., the Symbolic as the Law of culture—by the De Lacey family, whom he dearly loves, and cannot even create a society of his own in South America with a female monster that he futilely requests his creator Frankenstein to produce. Solitude torments the Monster so much that he considers himself even more miserable than Satan: “Satan had his companions, fellow-devils, to admire and encourage him; but I am solitary and abhorred” (p. 130). The De Lacey family excite within the Monster the force of desire to join human society; and the Monster, as we shall see, takes the knowledge of human language as the royal road to the satisfaction of this desire, only to become more and more aware of the impossibility of him acquiring human relationships due to his congenital monstrosity. The Monster thus cannot help but exclaim: “sorrow only increased with knowledge” (p. 120). In what follows, then, I will elaborate on the ways in which the Monster’s pursuit of human relationships—his desire to love and be loved—infllicts upon him that which some psychotherapists call “the primal wound,” that is, “the unimaginable terror of nonexistence” embodied by the negative experiences or qualities of “abandonment, powerlessness, and worthlessness.”⁵

Frankenstein is a kind of Bildungsroman, or novel of education, in the sense that the Monster grows from ignorance to a solid understanding of the human condition, from a natural state to a cultured one, or, in Freudian terms, from the

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⁴ By endowing the Monster with a loving heart, Shelley, as Musselwhite notes, seeks to show that “[t]he Monster is not in itself monstrous, there is no inherent monstrousness” (“Frankenstein: The Making of a Monster,” Partings Welded Together: Politics and Desire in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel [New York: Methuen, 1987], p. 59).

dominance of the pleasure principle to that of the reality principle. Education, according to Freud, serves as an incitement to the subordination of the pleasure principle to the reality principle, of fantasy to the activities of consciousness, in that education, as a form of authority, helps repress the sexual or life instincts to pay regard to reality, to the outside world that threatens to destroy our imagined joy. In “Civilization and its Discontents,” Freud points out three sources in the outside world that have the power to ruin our imagined pleasure and make us suffer: “the superior power of nature, the feebleness of our own bodies and the inadequacy of the regulations which adjust the mutual relationships of human beings in the family, the state and society.” Mankind has been able to come up with different ways of mitigating the violence of the destructive forces of nature as well as the pain of corporeal decay and dissolution.

Nevertheless, when it comes to the third source of suffering, mankind has not been successful in negotiating the problems created by human relationships because human beings, Freud believes, are essentially aggressive towards one another in such a way as to prove naive the Christian doctrine “Love thy neighbour as thyself.” Love, Freud notes, appears to be the only remedy for the suffering coming from social relationships, but this remedy is in fact precarious as there is no guarantee that your neighbour will love you back when you love him/her, let alone not everyone is worthy of your love. Therefore, if one believes in love as the way of regulating human relations, he has, Freud emphasises, “made himself dependent in a most dangerous way on a portion of the external world, namely his chosen love-object, and exposed himself to extreme suffering if he should be rejected by that object or should lose it

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through unfaithfulness or death.”8 That is to say, love makes us suffer because there is no controlling the person who is the object of our love. Rather, love creates a desire in the form of a hole at the core of our being which we imagine the person can fill out; there is always, however, a gap between fantasy and reality either because s/he may very well dissatisfy, reject or abandon us or simply because s/he, being human, can never fill out the hole. This situation, as we shall see, is that which happens to the Monster in his search for human relations: his “human neighbours” (p. 109) indirectly educate (or humanise) him to love and yet refuse his love in his first and last attempt to join them.

The Monster mentally develops in the manner of Lockean empiricism: his mind begins as a tabula rasa to be written on by observation and sensory experience. In his initial encounter with the world, “[n]o distinct ideas occupied [his] mind; all was confused” (p. 103); his sensory experience, however, gradually teaches him the functions of fire, food, housing, and so forth. The Monster lives in a nature-orientated world without anxiety and psychical pain until he encounters the Law of culture represented by his human neighbours—the De Lacey family—who cultivate him in such a way that he incorporates their “gentle manners” (p. 110) into his mind and strives towards their “perfect forms” (p. 114). Through “a small chink” (p. 107) in a hovel the Monster stays, he observes his human neighbours in a cottage: an old man has a benevolent countenance, a young man (Felix) has a graceful figure with brooding eyes, and a young woman (Agatha) has a sensitive heart and behaves tenderly; the youth help each other with housework whilst the old man plays a musical instrument “to produce sounds sweeter than the voice of the thrush or the nightingale” (p. 108). The way they look and they treat each other, one can say,

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8 Ibid., p. 291.
functions as an objet (petite) a for the Monster, namely, that which causes the Monster to desire (human love and relationships): “What chiefly struck me was the gentle manners of these people; and I longed to join them, but dared not” (p. 110). Thus begins his primitive desire, his “desire of the Other”: he desires not merely to be recognised by the De Lacey but, more importantly, to be the object of their desire.

The Monster, however, does not have the necessary courage to present himself to his human neighbours because he is fully aware of his own horrible deformity—his fundamental flaw—in contrast to their “perfect forms.” In a scenario that recalls Lacan’s notion of “the mirror stage” (le stade du miroir)—the gate to the Imaginary order—the Monster is frightened, or rather, wounded, by his own monstrosity for the first time:

I had admired the perfect forms of my cottagers—their grace, beauty, and delicate complexions: but how was I terrified, when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification. (p. 114)

It is tempting to say that here he is experiencing some kind of “primordial Discord” between the “perfect forms” of his human neighbours and his own “fragmented body” (corps morcelé), between integration and fragmentation. In Lacan, the infant

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9 Simply put, objet (petite) a, according to Bruce Fink, “is that which elicits desire: it is responsible for the advent of desire, for the particular form the desire in question takes, and for its intensity. Drawn schematically, we have: cause → desire → metonymic slippage from one object to the next” (The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance [Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1995], p. 91).


initially experiences its own body as piecemeal (*morcelé*) due to its physiological prematurity of birth; a primordial discord occurs when, at the age of 6 to 18 months, it perceives the integrated image of its own body in the mirror. To resolve this discord, the infant jubilantly (mis)identifying with the specular self-image because the coherent image shows to the infant the promise of self-mastery or autonomy. Here the Monster is “terrified” rather than jubilant on seeing its own mirror image because, instead of corporeal integrity that leads into the formation of the (ideal) ego and primary narcissism, he encounters “the fragmented body,” the fundamental monstrosity of which the Imaginary, or illusory, gestalt of the body strives psychically to protect the ego from slipping into awareness. Seen in this light, what terrifies and mortifies the Monster is not so much that he “has seen his mirror image—a frightening one—too quickly,” as that he is exposed to what the Imaginary order—the protective shield—is supposed to hide, that is, his congenital lack of corporeal totality.

The Monster’s mirror image, as Peter Brooks cogently puts it, “becomes the negation of hope, severing the Monster from [being an object of another’s] desire.”

His terrifying mirror image, however, does not stop him from being a desiring subject: he longs to become part of the De Laceys to the point of transforming them into an internal double. It is fair to say that the Monster’s mirror stage exists not in his own mirror image but in the “perfect forms” of the De Lacey family, whom he idealises and introjects as his “protectors” (p. 121). Their “perfect forms” constitute for the Monster the ideal ego (*moi idéal*), the promise of future wholeness that he desires to reach for his own weak, fragmented ego. For Lacan, such a promise is in fact built

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perilously on méconnaissance and constantly threatened by regression into the initial, chaotic state of “the fragmented body”:

Here we see the ego, in its essential resistance to the elusive process of Becoming, to the variations of Desire. This illusion of entity, in which a human being is always looking forward to self-mastery, entails a constant danger of sliding back again into the chaos from which he started; it hangs over the abyss of dizzy Ascent in which one can perhaps see the very essence of Anxiety.  

In other words, the primary experience of “the fragmented body” will return to haunt us with disintegration anxiety throughout our lives as long as we carry within us the desire for self-mastery or wholeness, stemming from the idealised illusion of unity in the mirror stage.  

This situation is what Lorenzo Chiesa calls the “(de)formative” effect of the ideal ego on the psyche: the introjection of the idealised illusion kindles the desire for integration which nevertheless is inevitably accompanied by the threat of disunity (“the fragmented body”); the stronger the desire, the more intense the threat.  

Seen in this light, “the fragmented body” can serve as the primal wound of “nonbeing,” the extinction of individual selfhood associated with the experiences of “abandonment, powerlessness, and worthlessness.”

In Frankenstein, the perfect forms of the Da Lacey exactly exert the

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15 In a similar vein, Melanie Klein states that the early ego develops according to the alternation of integration and disintegration: “the early ego largely lacks cohesion, and a tendency towards integration alternates with a tendency towards disintegration, a falling into bits” (“Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms,” The Selected Melanie Klein, ed. Juliet Mitchell [London: Penguin, 1991], p. 179). Going one step further than Klein, however, Lacan here suggests that such an alternation accompanies us throughout our lives and that (specular) integration is in fact illusory in the first place.

16 For Lacan, the threat of the fragmented body usually crops up in dreams or fantasies “in the form of disjointed limbs, or of those organs represented in exoscopy, growing wings and taking up arms for intestinal persecutions—the very same that the visionary Hieronymus Bosch has fixed, for all time, in painting” (Écrits, pp. 4, 11).


17 Firman and Gila, p. 16. Dylan Evans sees “the fragmented body” as the matrix of any sense of disintegration and disunity (p. 67).
(de)formative power upon the Monster: he is frequently tormented by the threat of nonbeing or disintegration after introjecting the perfect forms of his protectors and commencing his pursuit of human relations as a promise of integration or wholeness. The Monster hopes that to command the language of his protectors will satisfy his desire for wholeness, fulfil his fundamental lack of a complete form: “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 (italics mine)” (p. 115). To put it in Lacanian terms, he expects that his ability to enter “the Other qua language” will allow him to enter “the Other qua Symbolic.” Acquiring language turns out to be (de)formative for the Monster: the better he masters human language, the more profoundly he knows about the gregarious nature of human society, and yet the more painfully he is aware of his friendless and worthless life.

From the instructions that Felix bestows upon his Arabian fiancée Safie, the Monster learns how human society is structured according to wealth and parentage and how human beings are born and raised. Those instructions lead him to reflect sorrowfully upon his accursed origin for the first time: “And what was I? Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant. . . . [W]here were my friends and relations? No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses” (pp. 120-21). Here the Monster grieves not over the loss of an object he internalises (to which I shall return) but over the total absence of parental love in his life, a congenital deficiency that critically sharpens his identity crisis and

\[\text{18} \text{ I employ these two terms to distinguish between two types of the Symbolic based, respectively, on language and the Law of culture. Language, as Chiesa notes, functions for the child as protosymbolisation in that it “is always-already there for him” at the beginning of his life. Chiesa calls this situation “the Other qua language.” Not until the child resolves the Oedipus complex does he “(properly) enter the Other qua Symbolic as an individual subject” (p. 61). Whilst allowed to enter the Other qua language, the Monster, as we shall see, is foreclosed from the Other qua Symbolic for good.}\]
disintegration anxiety. Feeling incomplete and empty, the Monster desires even more to be loved by his protectors, the De Laceys, to compensate for his fundamental flaw. Unfortunately, the more strongly he desires to love and to be loved, the more he will suffer (from fear of fragmentation).

The Monster’s sense of disintegration increases considerably with his reading of the two texts he discovers by accident: Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Frankenstein’s laboratory journal of creating the Monster. *Paradise Lost* afflicts him with the pain of worthlessness and utter loneliness. The Monster identifies with Satan rather than Adam as “the fitter emblem of [his] condition”: he himself is “wretched, helpless, and alone,” whereas Adam is “guarded by the especial care of his Creator” and has Eve to soothe his sorrows and share his thoughts (pp. 129-30). On the other hand, the Monster considers Satan in fact more fortunate than himself as Satan has his fellow devils to admire him whilst he himself is “solitary and abhorred” (p. 230). From Frankenstein’s laboratory journal the Monster agonizingly realises he has been hated and abandoned by his own creator since the day he was “born”: “[B]reathless horror and disgust filled my [Frankenstein’s] heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room” (p. 131). These two texts extremely threaten the Monster with the annihilation of selfhood and plunge him into the fear of “the fragmented body”:

Increase of knowledge only discovered to me more clearly what a wretched outcast I was. I cherished hope, it is true; but it vanished, when I beheld my person reflected in water, or my shadow in the moonshine, even as that frail image and that inconstant shade. I endeavoured to crush these fears, and to fortify myself for the trial which in a few months I resolved to undergo. (p. 131)

The trial the Monster determines to undergo is to enter the Other *qua* Symbolic, to
become an object of desire for the De Lacey family. Fully aware that his hideous look would frustrate his desire to be loved, he decides to first approach the blind patriarch De Lacey and, through him, to win the love of his children. To achieve this goal, he trusts in the Symbolic as the Law of culture—viz., “Love thy neighbour as thyself”; “Could they turn from their door one, however monstrous, who solicited their compassion and friendship?” (p. 130) asks the Monster, expecting that they will love their (monstrous) neighbour as themselves.

Initially the art of language seems to work in favour of the Monster’s plan: “I am blind,” says the old father, “and cannot judge of your countenance, but there is something in your words, which persuades me that you are sincere. I am poor, and an exile; but it will afford me true pleasure to be in any way serviceable to a human creature” (italics mine)” (p. 134). The old man’s kindness removes the Monster’s fear of being driven away from human society, from the Other qua Symbolic; but the Monster, albeit mastering human language, fails to detect—or perhaps, unconsciously chooses to ignore—the old man’s implication that it is to “a human creature” he would gladly offer help. Foreseeable, then, is the failure of the Monster—who cannot be categorised as “human” (at least physically speaking) in the Symbolic order of things.19 The old man’s sympathetic words “raise [him] from the dust” (p. 134) until other family members return and behold his un-Symbolisable deformity: Felix violently strikes him, Agatha faints, and Safie flees. Wounded both physically and psychically, the Monster sinks into powerlessness and emptiness. On the next day, though, concluding that the other family members must have lacked preparedness for his visible presence, the Monster, driven by “the compulsion to repeat,”20 returns to

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20 In his last work “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” Freud revises his belief in dreams as the fulfilment of unconscious wishes by pointing out that certain dreams arise “in obedience to the compulsion to
the cottage of the De Laceys to win the father back first, only to discover that his protectors—“the only link that held [him] to the world” (p. 138)—have all gone. The Monster believes in the art of language to satisfy his desire for wholeness, but the art turns out to be “deceptive: it has contextualized desire as lack” and yet can never provide “a way to overcome lack and satisfy desire.”

Feeling completely unsatisfied and abandoned, the Monster sees the De Laceys no longer just as protectors but persecutors, no longer simply as the object of “pleasant phantasies” but the object of “destructive phantasies.” More precisely, the Monster feels both love and hate towards the De Laceys: love because he cannot do without them, on whom his future wholeness depends; and hate because he has been disintegrated by the loss of them, his internal objects. Again, we see the (de)formative effect of the ideal ego on the psyche. The Monster says in a highly ambivalent tone:

For the first time the feelings of revenge and hatred filled my bosom, and I did not strive to control them. . . . When I thought of my friends, of the mild voice of De Lacey, the gentle eyes of Agatha, and the exquisite beauty of the Arabian, these thoughts vanished, and a gush of tears somewhat soothed me. But again, when I reflected that they had spurned me and deserted me, anger returned, a rage of anger. (p. 138)

Eventually, hate gains the upper hand over love: the Monster turns into a Satanic figure by setting fire to the cottage of his human neighbours and, furthermore, by

repeat [traumatic experiences]” (PFL 11, p. 304) rather than to gain pleasure. The purpose of repetition is to master a painful situation that has happened too quickly.

Brooks, p. 93.

Klein, “Love, Guilt and Reparation,” Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works: 1921-45 (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 308. Klein employs these two terms to describe the baby’s impulses towards (the breast of) the mother, its first object of love and hate (or “good” and “bad” objects), during the first years of life; the interplay of these opposite impulses becomes the foundation of the ambivalence we undergo when mourning over the loss of someone outside ourselves whom we have internalised. See also Klein, “Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States,” p. 348. Lacan would use “hainamoration,” a word he coins that consists of haine (hate) and énamoré (enamored), to describe such a situation (On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge, trans. Bruce Fink [New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1998], p. 90).
vow[ing] eternal hatred and vengeance to all mankind” (p. 141). He destroys their cottage—“the only school in which [he] had studied human nature” (p. 129)—as a figurative act of killing his internal bad objects; and declares an everlasting war against mankind as a full realisation that he can never be loved by humans even when sincerely loving them, that is, he is foreclosed forever by the Other qua Symbolic. He now finds the unrelenting answer to the question once occurring to him when reading Volney’s *Ruins of Empire*: “Was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous, and magnificent, yet so vicious and base? He appeared at one time a mere scion of the evil principle, and at another, as all that can be conceived of noble and godlike” (p. 119).

To conclude, with her novel *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley, as we have seen, anticipates Freud in throwing into question the power of love as the resolution to the suffering that arises from the relation to others in human society. The Monster wholeheartedly expects the De Laceys—from whom he learns to be gentle and kindhearted—to overlook his physical monstrosity and love him, only to find that this virtuous family are not much different from the barbarous villagers who attacked him earlier in the novel. It comes as no surprise, then, that the benevolent Monster becomes a Satanic, cynical murderer, paying back the violence of human society with violence against it. At the end of the novel, the Monster woefully remarks: “Once I falsely hoped to meet with beings, who, pardoning my outward form, would love me for the excellent qualities which I was capable of unfolding. . . . But now crime has degraded me beneath the meanest animal” (p. 221). Reading the Monster’s confession of guilt, one cannot help but sympathise with him in his failed attempt to be loved and agree painfully and unwillingly with Kristeva that indeed “love is an affliction.”
Works Cited


