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The Monstrosity of Language: *Frankenstein* and the Descent into Cultural Misrepresentation

*The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide*

(Milton, XII 646-47)

In “Exploring the Universe with John Milton and Mary Shelley,” David Poston recounts his experience of teaching *Frankenstein* and *Paradise Lost* to his students, highlighting their responses to these complementary works. As they study both narratives, his students begin to ponder the “mystery of the universe and the ways of God and humankind [...] cultural past and culture future [...] their] own nature and limits” (Poston 28). Undoubtedly *Frankenstein* can evoke intense emotions and thoughts in regards to creation and responsibility, especially when the Monster is not merely a grunting disfigurement that wreaks havoc without reason. However, by pairing *Frankenstein* with *Paradise Lost*, Poston allows his students to discover the similarities between Shelley’s Monster and Milton’s Eve—creations that were neglected and ostracized by their creators, ultimately leading to their sin and downfall. Milton created “a God [...] that] manipulated an Eve who was [...] unprepared to deal with Satan, just as Victor, playing God, sent his creation into the world [...] unprepared and uncounseled” (30). From this interpretation, the students begin posing questions about these creatures, and how they were “both victims of their creator” (31). Poston’s students’ analytical observations of Milton and Shelley mirror the popular interpretation of *Frankenstein* in terms of Victor’s thoughtless neglect of his creation.

It was easy, almost instinctual, to come to the same conclusion when I read *Frankenstein* for the first time. From a young age, Victor had the desire to play God and go beyond the capabilities of man, unaware of the consequences and responsibilities of his actions. However, there is more to Shelley’s tale regarding responsibility and the Monster’s fall than Victor’s abandonment. Poston and his students dive deeper into this text, utilizing the tools of the reader-response school of criticism to do so. Poston’s students kept a notebook of their comments and reactions to each chapter of *Frankenstein*,

allowing them to pause their reading and think critically about whatever struck them as interesting or troublesome. This method led one of the students to make an insightful observation of Shelley's work: "I believe if the creature hadn't read *Paradise Lost* he would have remained good" (33). Such a statement provokes many questions: what effect does *Paradise Lost* have on the Monster? Does it shape his destiny? Does it play a larger role in how people view each other, creation and themselves? As Poston states: "*Paradise Lost* represents a culmination of centuries of cultural tradition, an immeasurably deep storehouse of myth, literature and theology" (28). Therefore, crucial questions present themselves: how deep are the roots of that "cultural tradition" in society and the minds of common people? How deep are those roots in the mind of Victor?

With these questions in mind, other schools of thought needed to be employed. Peter Brooks' "Godlike Science/Unhallowed Arts: Language, Nature, and Monstrosity" employs a structuralist approach to Shelley's work, discussing how the Monster's mastery of language serves as a compensation for his deformed figure, making him an eloquent creature. This is true; through language, the Monster learns reason, demonstrates a refined intelligence, and can easily appeal to a person's compassion. The Monster is mindful of the power of language and how to utilize it in order for people, even for mere seconds, to realize that he is a being with thoughts, feelings and dreams. Brooks highlights a moment in the novel when Victor's disposition towards the Monster momentarily shifts from disgust to compassion: "His words had a strange effect upon me. I compassionated him" (Shelley 147). This passage conveys the Monster's purpose with language, in regards to creating relationships. It is a means of connecting with man, despite obvious physical differences. It is language that will allow the Monster to be man's equal. Structuralists emphasize "the symbolic order [...] of language, the systematic and trans-subjective order of the signifier, the cultural system into which individual subjects are inserted" (Brooks 207). It is only in language that the Monster feels that he can overcome his physical deformity, thus enabling other people to look past his outer appearance. Through the symbolic, the Monster then believes he can transcend monstrosity to become a human being worthy of compassion and friendship.

Once identifying language as a symbolic order, Brooks then suggests that the Monster's exclusion from communication is in fact monstrous itself, with regard to the chain of existence.

According to Brooks, “the term chain [...] identifies meaning as residing in a systematic network of relation, in the symbolic”—thus a signifying chain (208). The Monster wishes to “become linked to the chain of existence and events, from which [he is] excluded” (Shelley 147). However, the Monster cannot communicate with man because the latter is unable to look past his physical appearance. Since positive communication with man is improbable, the Monster believes he will only begin to signify through the creation of a female monster that he can communicate with on a similar level. Therefore, the Monster views a mastery of language as a means for integration into existence and recognition. Brooks views Shelley’s narrative as a commentary on language, with its power to express love, purpose, and compensate for an appearance that is not true to one’s self.

However, as the Monster’s acquisition of language has shaped his perception of identity and morality, it has also consequently limited his perception of self. This is prevalent when the Monster conveys how he views himself to Victor: “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. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded” (Shelley 100). Eloquently spoken, yes. A misinterpretation of roles and identity? Perhaps so. Through his readings and internalization of *Paradise Lost*, the Monster concludes that his only role in this world is that of Lucifer—a fallen creature that was cast out of Heaven, destined to cause chaos and pain to others. Although the Monster was “united by no link to any other being in existence,” God created Adam, “a perfect creature [...] guarded by the especial care of his Creator [...] as well as] allowed to converse with and acquire knowledge” (124). The Monster, therefore, sees more disparaging difference than similarity between himself and Adam. Even though the Monster has an empathetic nature, only ever wanting companionship, he is led to believe that he is incapable of such pleasures since it does not fit the “wretched, helpless and alone” role of Lucifer (124).

The Monster expands his knowledge, widens his vocabulary, and develops a nuanced sense of ethics and morality. Yet, in doing so, he has also limited his sense of identity, subjecting himself to the restrictive identifiers present in hegemonic language, established centuries before his creation. He is left with the shortcomings of contextual language that is shaped by one of the most important,

well known texts in the world: the Bible. Although the Monster does not directly read the Bible, he is familiar with *Paradise Lost*, which is “a natural extension” of the text (Poston 33). The Monster wishes to overcome the limitations of his deformed figure through the notion that “language as a symbolic order [...] must compensate for nature” (Brooks 210). While Brooks does recognize that language is vital for the Monster in his pursuits to be part of the chain of existence, he makes a paradoxical statement about such language: “the Monster unerringly discovers language to be on the side of culture rather than nature, and to imply the structures of relation at the basis of culture” (209). Although Brooks mentions culture as an important component of language, he does not delve deeper into the kind of culture we see the Monster encounter through his reading of *Paradise Lost*, which shapes his self-identification.

In “Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Milton’s Monstrous Myth,” John B. Lamb uses a new historicist and post-structural approach to illustrate the implications that language can have on identity, specifically on how *Paradise Lost* shaped the Monster’s misguided understanding of self. Lamb argues that identity is a verbal construct: a product of cultural naming that has led the Monster to an unavoidable misnaming of his role amongst man (305). In the early stages of the Monster’s life, during his acquisition of knowledge and education, the Monster becomes most familiar with *Paradise Lost*. The Monster regards this work as “true history” (306).

Shelley makes a clear link between language and the creation of the monstrous. The Monster characterizes language as a “godlike science” that he has mastered, believing that this will allow him to compensate for his hideous form, which would then enable him to shape his own history and gain control of self. However, Lamb makes a clear association between Milton’s two fallen male figures and the Monster’s shaping of his own identity. Since Milton’s work serves as a “commandment of being,” the Monster views Adam and Lucifer as his only two options for autonomy and selfhood (306). After an internalization of the text, since he is not beautiful and perfect like Adam or admired by his Creator, the Monster can only identify with the Lucifer figure. Lucifer exemplifies the only figure that has achieved true autonomy through his isolation, which parallels the Monster’s experience amongst men.

While Poston focuses on the parallels between Eve and the Monster, Lamb highlights the shared likeness between the Monster and Victor, in regards to the essence of their pursuits. Victor

and the Monster both “seek mastery over origins and the fullness of presence” (Lamb 312). While Victor uses science and philosophy to go beyond the realm of human capabilities, the Monster tries to use language to transcend the boundaries of self, escaping the limitations of life and identity. Ironically, though, it is language itself that is monstrous: it has become a cultural system with a pre-established hierarchy that defines all possible definitions of being—in this instance, Adam or Lucifer (312). Therefore, the monster is not a master of language, but rather language masters his identity, which has been limited by the cultural hierarchy in language.

Poststructuralists like Lamb believe that there are frameworks and systems of language that create hegemonies to establish a hierarchy. Therefore, critics of this school of thought deconstruct the language of the text or analyze the rigid limits that language has on interpretation. Lamb argues that Shelley consciously used *Paradise Lost* as the Monster’s guiding text in order to expose how “the illusory bourgeois individualism” present in language limits self-expression and identity (306). When the Monster had no knowledge of language or the use of it, he was a creature of free will. He was not limited by labels or prescribed social roles. Although detached from other human beings and communication, he was not shackled by a “monstrous” self-fulfilled prophecy that he falls into once language and its cultural implications identify him as so. Lamb’s focus on the effects of *Paradise Lost* on the Monster and the institutionalized limitation of identity illustrates its predominant presence throughout history, especially in the 19th century when the molds of self-expression began to crack. It is the “monolithic and monologic voice of *Paradise Lost*” that created “ontological boundaries” within Shelley’s era (317). New historicists believe that literature should be interpreted within the context of that historical and cultural period; Lamb associates Shelley’s work with the cultural misnaming of identity in the 19th century as a result of the “limited and limiting taxonomy of language,” with *Paradise Lost* as its guiding material (312). Like the Monster, society has adopted certain ideologies in works like *Paradise Lost* as “true history,” which has thus created a linguistic system to inhibit all forms of self-expression and identity. Shelley’s novel serves as a representation of how Milton’s epic creates a false sense of identity due to residual concepts and ideas that existed in 19th century culture (308).

Although many critics have discussed the effect of language on the Monster, it is crucial to

examine further how these limitations in the linguistic system not only aid in the Monster's fall, but Victor's as well. This idea of the cultural system in language is exemplified through the reader responses that Poston incorporated into his critique. Poston recognized that in the several communities in which he taught, "the Bible stories [were] often the first and best-known stories, ones which have real value as part of the students' culture" (33). Since these biblical stories are many people's first exposure to morality, society is more inclined to treat them as a guiding text, much like how the Monster treated *Paradise Lost* as his guide. If the Bible is prominent in modern society it can be assumed that it had an even firmer hold on those in the 19th century when those ideals were habitually encouraged.

This point relates back to a question posed earlier: how deep are the roots of that "cultural tradition"? Yes, the pre-established hierarchy of language present in *Paradise Lost* and its implications on the Monster has been analyzed thoroughly. However, the significant impact that such language has on Victor, his views of the Monster, and his sense of responsibility for it, have yet to be analyzed fully. Lamb recognizes that Victor juggles the two ideals of Adam and Lucifer. Victor regards himself as a "rebellious angel" who has gone against his father's wishes in pursuit of the beyond (309). Even so, while identifying himself with the Lucifer figure, he also has an Adam-like focus on beauty and good. Victor views his creation as a failure—a heinous, disgusting Monster with its "horrid contrast with watery eyes [...] shriveled complexion and straight black lips" (Shelley 57). His clear disappointment with his creation signifies the impact that *Paradise Lost* has had on his perception of what/who is worthy of his love and admiration, or, conversely, his disdain and hate. His mind is shaped by this hegemonic language; therefore, due to those predetermined influences, Victor's creature is thus monstrous and unworthy of compassion. However, if analyzed closely, it will become clear that Victor is also working within a limited set of identifiers before him, leading to a misguided perception parallel to his Monster.

Although Victor grew up with a fiery desire to explore the depths of science, his mind was heavily influenced by the hegemony of language. Through his study of natural philosophy, Victor wants to obtain the "glory [of the] discovery if [he should] banish disease [...] and make man invulnerable" (Shelley 29). Already at a young age, Victor wants to emulate God. Rather than study his admired predecessors and add to their findings of natural philosophy, he wants to be an almighty force that

goes beyond man to perform the impossible. After the tragic death of his mother, Victor forsakes this ambition and his studies. Interestingly, one would think that a personal tragedy like this would further inspire someone who wants to rid the world of all disease. However, it is the natural philosophy professor, M. Waldman, who awakens Victor's early ambitions. During one of his lectures, Waldman depicts natural philosophers as God-like, with a language richly infused with religion:

They ascend into heavens; they have discovered how the blood circulates, and the nature of the air we breathe. They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they command the thunders of Heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its own shadow. (Shelley 37)

As Victor listens to this speech, a stirring in his chest begins. In awe of natural philosophy, he is inspired to resume his previous studies.

Victor's response to these few lines is paramount in understanding how Victor then reacts once his creation is animated. Victor does not want to be ordinary, like Adam. He does not want to be painted in God's image—a mere fraction of the divine capabilities that He has. No, Victor wants to be God and have that power of creation. Like the Monster, Victor is only familiar with a limited set of roles that language and its predetermined, cultural influences have given him. He does not want to be Adam, and even though he, at times, feels like a rebellious angel that goes against the grain, it still does not render him the power he seeks. Therefore, Victor is only left with one other role and an ambitious one at that—God. Victor's exposure to works like *Paradise Lost* and religiously-infused language has led him to consider himself a God-like figure. With language being a central component to the human experience, Victor is left with limited determinants of destiny and identity—much like his Monster.

In order to expose the deep roots of hegemonic language in the 19th century that led to both characters' fall, a close reading of Victor's first reaction to the birth of his creation is crucial. As Victor's creation "breathed hard" and "had a convulsive motion [to] its limbs," the only sensation that Victor feels in that moment is "breathless horror and disgust [in his] heart" (Shelley 48). Victor finally accomplished his heart's desire: he has created life from death—he has performed an act of God. In this pivotal moment, Victor has fulfilled the only role he felt that he could fit; however, Shelley illustrates the constraints of language and its cultural influences that deny Victor the satisfaction of his creation.

All that Victor sees is a “wretch—the miserable monster” (49). Although this creature had done nothing heinous, destructive or evil, Victor has already deemed it as a Monster. Victor knows nothing of the Monster’s disposition or innately gentle nature. Victor can only base this conclusion on one thing: his culturally molded inclination to label the creature as Satanic because, as the Monster later laments, he is not beautiful like “thy Adam” (91).

Victor shares the same view as the Monster in regards to identity and its culturally-based language. This is evident when Victor claims his creation was a “thing such as even Dante could not have conceived” (Shelley 49). Such a statement illustrates the unconscious interweaving of biblically-influenced work and perceptions of self. Victor’s repertoire of associations and identities are based upon the system of language that has determined all facets of self and identity. Therefore, like the Monster, Victor is not only susceptible to mislabeling himself but also unjustifiably calls his creation a wretch. When Victor later encounters his Monster and listens to his tale, he comes to a realization about his creation and his certain responsibilities: “For the first time, also, I felt what the duties of a creator towards his creature were, and that I ought to render him happy before I complained of his wickedness” (97). This is the first time that Victor acknowledges his responsibility as a creator, as well as his part in his creation’s misery. This passage illustrates that Victor, from his limited selection of roles, has chosen one that he thought was most in his likeness. In some ways, Victor is like God in *Paradise Lost*—they both created beings and sent them into the world, without direction or knowledge. However, it is far more crucial to recognize that Victor, unconsciously, alludes to his Godlike self-identity when regarding himself as a “creator.” This conveys the hegemonic system of language that presented itself in Victor’s early rearing with this biblical subtext, deeply woven into the lament of his experience with the Monster.

Although Victor’s early childhood inquiries centered on science, these interests help to better explain how he came to mislabel himself and his creation. Victor, as a young child, possessed a strong sense of self-awareness and curiosity. While his dear friend, Clerval, and cousin, Elizabeth, devoted themselves to romance texts filled with adventure and chivalry, Victor’s inquiries were more “directed to the metaphysical, or in its highest sense, the physical secrets of the world” (Shelley 26). The study

of metaphysics goes beyond physics—it’s “the science which treats of beings abstracted from all matter, particularly those purely spiritual, as God and the human soul” (Johnson 1). Furthermore, according to Descartes, metaphysics “[is] the principles of knowledge, among which is the explication of the principal attributes of God, of the immateriality of the soul, and of all the clear and simple notions that are in us [...hence] all Philosophy is like a tree, of which Metaphysics is the root” (1). Victor’s fixation on the study of natural philosophy stemmed from these divine inquiries—the same core values and beliefs present in Christian texts, especially the Bible. Therefore, it is evident that Victor’s early exposure to these texts sparked an interest in the beyond and a yearning to learn the “secrets of heaven and earth” (Shelley 26). Victor, like the Monster, was introduced to specific texts during a critical period in his childhood, when the mind absorbs vast amounts of knowledge and language. Therefore, this acquisition of metaphysical knowledge and its associated language laid the groundwork for his perception of self and the world. Biblical texts are his roots, natural philosophy the trunk and branches that stem from the tree directly influenced by such a foundation.

During this acquisition, while Victor becomes familiar with natural philosophy, it is the Bible that inspired his desire to learn of the “inner spirit of nature and the mysterious soul of man” (Shelley 26). It is the Bible that cultivated Victor’s mind, thus leading him to search for other means to study the beyond. Victor unconsciously associates much of what he encounters with biblical allusions that are present in his own language, much the commonplace language of his time. Just as Lamb recognizes, language holds within it a hierarchy of associations and cultural influences that shape values and perceptions. In hindsight, this shaping explains why Victor equates himself to God and condemns his creation—the representations and self-identifiers prominent in language leave him with a limited bank to work within.

Aside from Victor’s more explicit reference to religiously based metaphysics, keep in mind that Victor is telling his story to Walton in this novel. These are his words—his associations and influences present in his language. That being so, the nature of language and its hegemony is painstakingly clear in Victor’s rhetoric. For instance, when Victor recollects his first meeting with Elizabeth, he describes her features as “celestial” or “saintly” (Shelley 27). Victor continues to use these

religiously-based, ethereal terms to describe Elizabeth throughout the novel, just as he uses demonic rhetoric in reference to the Monster. Similar to the way the Monster uses *Paradise Lost* to find his identity, Victor uses his religious upbringing to identify himself as well as others he has encountered throughout his life. These allusions and associations from the Bible are his introduction to language. As mentioned before, those first experiences on an impressionable mind have lasting effects, such as Victor's culturally-molded repertoire that he employs daily. Each image and being that Victor crosses enters the eye and travels to the mind, where language and its cultural associations dwell.

Shelley uses Victor's rhetoric to depict the deep roots of culture in language, especially its ancient teachings and values that are found in the Bible. The Monster's and Victor's language serves as a representation of how its cultural hierarchy can be a danger to one's identity. When Victor goes off to school, he encounters a professor who chastises him for his inability to adapt to a modern way of thinking—an inability to broaden his perception. Professor M. Krempe equates Victor's study of natural philosophy to “fancies [that...] are a thousand years old and as musty as they are ancient [...especially] in this enlightened age” (Shelley 35). Even though Krempe is arguing for the superiority of chemistry over natural philosophy, this scene directly correlates with Shelley's understanding of how dated cultural influences present within language deform identity and inhibit the pursuit of knowledge.

As Lamb points out, Shelley ultimately implies that the damage from this limited field of language can only be healed through the expansion of self-identification. Shelley's narrative points us beyond Milton's hegemonic epic “in search of another ‘true history’ of what we are” (Lamb 319). The disagreement between Krempe and Victor further exemplifies this idea: Victor's study of ancient natural philosophy is embedded in the religious context of creation that only offers a select few identifiers and roles. Ancient philosophy and the Bible provide narrow ideas of nature and identity, in which progressive thought and understanding of being and existence are absent. In other words, Shelley's novel is a warning. Knowledge and forms of identity will always continue to grow; however, this growth must be adapted into cultural language, expanding the hierarchy to include all facets of self-expression. It is imperative to recognize new works—*new language*—as supplements to commandments of being, in order to progress scientifically, culturally and socially.

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