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"A Mere Tale of Spectres:"
the Ontology of Shelley's *Frankenstein*

"I shall be with you on your wedding night," the lonely creature threatens, when Victor Frankenstein refuses to create a companion for him.[1] Victor assumes that he himself is being threatened, but the reader knows better—that the creature is threatening Victor's fiancée, Elizabeth. The reader has picked up on several clues that Victor Frankenstein has overlooked, most notably that Victor has just destroyed the female who would have been a wife or partner for the creature, and the creature is clearly threatening retribution. Sure enough, on the night of his wedding, Victor hears "a shrill and dreadful scream. It came from the room into which Elizabeth had retired. As I heard it," Victor says, "the whole truth rushed into my mind."[2] The creature's intentions are suddenly revealed to Victor. What the creature's language has failed to communicate, Elizabeth's scream makes loud and clear. This scene is an interesting one for several reasons. For one, it highlights Victor's unreliability, his inability to interpret things the way everyone else does. For another, it reveals the novel's anxiety about the relationship between the natural world, perhaps embodied by Elizabeth, and the supernatural, embodied by the creature. But primarily, it encapsulates a larger doubt that pervades the novel, doubt about the ability of language to communicate certain things effectively in the novel, when an inarticulate

scream expresses what language has not.

Gothic novels such as *Frankenstein* betray much anxiety about what was at stake ontologically and epistemologically in the Enlightenment revolution. As George Haggerty notes, the gothic tale "becomes a structure of belief and understanding that defies the tenets of realistic novelizing…. It emerges as the form that allows private experience to be suspended between novelistic fact and romantic fantasy, between daylight and moonlight, with the result that a new power of literary expression is realized."[3] Gothic novels are keenly aware that issues of subjectivity permeate any narrative, and all gothic narratives thematise ontological questions, issues surrounding interpretation, and problems with representation. For one thing, in *Frankenstein* we have a first-person narrator, a homodiegetic storyteller. Todorov notes that a first-person narrator is the best way to present the fantastic, which is true because we are particularly vulnerable to ambiguity in first-person narration.[4] Susan Stewart notes that "We derive our confidence in the reliability of the 'I' from its invitation to change places, its articulation of itself as an ordinary human voice, a voice telling a true experience narrative like any other such narrative we might encounter in our everyday lives."[5] In other words, Walton and Frankenstein exist within the diegesis, and because the story is formally identical to a story we might tell, we sympathise with them, relatively ordinary characters in the midst of the extraordinary.

In using first-person narrators, *Frankenstein* does its best to create confusion and ambiguity. It is not just the events of the novel but the narrative itself that defies interpretation: "A first-person narrator may be assessed for his reliability if the author supplies the necessary ironic clues. Frequently, Gothic fiction leaves us guessing and thereby greatly increases the sense of groping toward something puzzling and partly known…. [T]he narrative method is always

used to make the world of the novel strange," Elizabeth MacAndrew writes. [6] Along similar lines, Mark Hennelly notes that one existentialist theme in the gothic novel is the failure of real communication and the irony in speech.[7] Both MacAndrew and Hennelly see a failure of language, here, an indeterminacy in language that necessarily extends to the story. Although we search for meaning, both the gothic mind and the gothic world are strange, unable to be represented or understood.

But most critics fail to consider these issues in conjunction with the realist texts of the period. When the two genres are considered together, they are usually opposed—realist novels characterised as participating in the Enlightenment, gothic novels not. The relationship between the two literatures, though, is much more complicated and much more fruitful. We must acknowledge that Frankenstein's misinterpretation of the creature's threat, while frustrating, results from very real questions about the world around him. Shelley's novel and more realist texts are engaged in a conversation about the nature of the world, of the mind, and of language. The story that Shelley tells and the anxieties she betrays are intrinsically related. Specifically, with the central event in the novel, the creation, Shelley resists the pragmatic approach that the more realistic novels of the time, Jane Austen's and Sir Walter Scott's, take toward questions about physical or metaphysical status—what it means to be supernatural, for example.

Furthermore, once the reader accepts the possibility of the creature's coming to life, the novel must provide both the reader and the novel's characters with witnesses who can attest to the truth or falsity of this fantastic event. But in giving their testimonies, the novel's witnesses muddy rather than clarify the events they would explain and do little more than give rise to the kind of doubt a jury might have about whether an account of an event can ever be trustworthy. In fact, the structure of the novel revolves around the possibility of witnessing, and just as the

characters in the novel remain unconvinced of the creature's true nature, the reader is finally

unable to trust any of the novel's three narrators. Our situation as readers is analogous to

Walton's situation as the narratee: we are listening to an incredible story and trying to make

some sense of it. And of course the entire novel is made up of various levels of nested

storytelling, from Walton's tale to the stories the cottagers tell, and to that extent the novel very

literally revolves around storytelling and interpretation. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear

that the more preternatural the premise, and thus the more necessary the witnesses, the less likely

it is that any account could suffice. Ultimately, in *Frankenstein* language is incapable of

representing subjectivity, and it is an anxiety over this fact that motivates the novel.

To understand Shelley's deviation from the dominant literary forces, of course, we must

examine the characteristics of novels that *Frankenstein* resists. Scott and Austen dominated

Romantic fiction, and both participate in the increasingly pervasive realist mode. In fact, Scott's

definition of the novel matches quite closely the standard definition of realism: he writes that the

novel is a "fictitious narrative [in which] the events are accommodated to the ordinary train of

human events, and the modern state of society."[8] The key word here is "ordinary." It is this

willingness to focus on the ordinary, on the seemingly mundane, that anticipates the priorities of

Victorian Realism, with its attention to social relationships and the mundane.[9] Scott's historical

accuracy is an attempt to represent the reader's world more faithfully than romances or gothic

novels had. In fact, as Elliot Engel and Margaret King point out, "Scott's painstakingly accurate

research into the historical events and local customs which form the background of his novels

helped to elevate the status of the novel by making it a source of factual knowledge rather than

mere frivolous entertainment."[10] That the reader might learn something in a novel about the

actual world, not only about a fictional world, is an idea central to realist fiction. Harry Shaw has

called Scott's novels a "metonymical representation" of the world, a "fictional means to represent history seen in the mode of historicism."[11] Scott's novels purport to tell the truth about what happened, not only in the novel, but occasionally in real life.

Scott's novels, then, embody a Romantic realism, recounting the ordinary events and using the seemingly transparent language that would soon dominate English fiction. Scott's novels, though, were not the only ones reshaping the dominant fictional mode—Jane Austen's novels were perhaps even more realistic.

In several ways, Austen predicted Victorian realism more clearly than Scott did. George Levine writes that "Realism got its second full start in the English novel (after Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding) in the work of Jane Austen, and in the historical context of Romantic transformations of experience that reveal the world in a grain of sand."[12] Levine's claim that Austen's novels "reveal the world" is telling. Even more than Scott's, her novels do, in fact, appear to reflect the world in which her readers lived, as opposed to novels more heavily influenced by romance, which are clearly fictional. In fact, Scott himself praised this quality in Austen's novels in a review of *Emma*:

> The narrative of all [Austen's] novels is composed of such common occurrences as may have fallen under the observation of most folks; and her dramatis personae conduct themselves upon the motives and principles which the readers may recognize as ruling their own and that of most of their acquaintances.[13]

Austen's focus is not the extraordinary, but the everyday. Levine does acknowledge that, "on the fringes of the most confident realism, even Austen's, is the perception of these monstrous, unnamable possibilities. They threaten the civilised order that the book describes and the narrator's voice implies."[14] Of course, the project of Austen's novel is to resist these possibilities. Scott's review explains how that might work. In praising the high probability of events in Austen's novels, Scott assumes that it is possible to "copy" nature "as she really exists"

and to "represent" correctly what goes on in the world. This assumption requires not only a particular conception of language, specifically that it represents reliably, but a particular conception of the world, that it is comprehensible, knowable.

In Volume Three of Shelley's novel, Victor Frankenstein laments the murder of his friend, Henry Clerval. "And where does he now exist?" Victor asks. "Is this gentle and lovely being lost forever? Has this mind so replete with ideas, imaginations so fanciful and magnificent, which formed a world, whose existence depended on the life of its creator; has this mind perished?"[15] In so asking, Victor alludes to one of the central preoccupations of the novel: what the nature of the physical world might be. In this lamentation, Victor claims that Clerval's mind has "formed a world." It is not clear to the reader, and ultimately not even to Victor, whether the world that Clerval's mind has formed is coextensive with or identical to the real world. In raising this question, Shelley's novel differs markedly from Austen's and Scott's novels. In general, *Frankenstein* has very little to do with ordinary life; it details events that strain even the most willing reader's credulity, and the difficulty in understanding the difference between what is real and what is not plays a central role, as do questions of the fantastic and of the merely improbable.

Frankenstein deals explicitly with seemingly supernatural events and is thus usually considered a gothic novel. Jerrold Hogle, in particular, argues that it belongs to that genre.[16] In Shelley's novel we find a damsel in distress and the action takes place in distant lands. Still, just what role the supernatural plays in *Frankenstein* is unclear. At the heart of the story, of course, is the central question of the fantastic that arises with Victor's bestowing life on a lifeless body.[17] For his part, Victor insists that digging around among corpses does not bother him, that he is particularly invulnerable to "supernatural horrors. I do not ever remember to have trembled," he

says, "at a tale of superstition, or to have feared the apparition of a spirit. Darkness had no effect

upon my fancy; and a churchyard was to me merely the receptacle of bodies deprived of life,

which . . . had become food for the worm."[18] According to Victor, at least initially, his story has

nothing to do with the supernatural or the fantastic; his bringing the creature to life is, he claims,

merely scientific. Margaret Carter points out that "the creation of the monster, though not

supernatural, is preternatural in the sense of going beyond and violating nature as conventionally

understood."[19] Something supernatural would actually violate the laws of nature, not just our

understanding of them. According to Victor, there is no violation of these laws, only a new

application, and thus the novel would not include the supernatural or even the fantastic.

Still, the novel itself turns out to be much less sure about the status of the creation than

Victor at first seems to be. Shelley herself, or rather Percy Shelley, famously anticipates

questions over the story's probability and the violation of the laws of nature, in the preface to the

novel.[20] The preface ambiguously describes the creature's being brought to life:

> The event on which the fiction is founded has been supposed [by some] as not of
> impossible occurrence. I shall not be supposed as according the remotest degree
> of serious faith to such an imagination; yet, in assuming it as the basis of a work
> of fancy, I have not considered myself as merely weaving a series of supernatural
> terrors. The event on which the interest of the story depends is exempt from the
> disadvantages of a mere tale of spectres or enchantment [but is] impossible as a
> physical fact.[21]

The meaning of this passage could hardly be less clear, and if anything is conveyed to the reader,

it is that it is impossible to say whether the story includes supernatural elements or not. Twice,

the preface describes the creation as "impossible," and twice the preface claims the creation is

not "supernatural" or "enchanted." Furthermore, the preface characterises the nature of the event

primarily in terms of the interpretation, of who supposes or considers what, not in terms of what

may or may not be true. What is important here is not that the question of the possibility of the

creature's coming to life be answered, but that there is a question at all. Especially after Victor's reliability and sanity are undermined later in the novel, it is much harder to take his word for the nature of his creation, and with this uncertainty regarding the ontological status of the events in the novel, the novel maintains what would normally be a mere hesitation, the state of the fantastic.

Ultimately, Victor himself is less sure than he at first seems to be about the ontological status of the creation. Even when describing the creature's coming to life, Victor admits that "some miracle might have produced it, yet the stages of the discovery were distinct and probable."[22] Victor does not claim, it turns out, that bringing the creature to life is a scientific undertaking, one that could be repeated and that follows the rules of nature, an event that is merely uncanny. In fact, Samuel Holmes Vasbinder claims that Frankenstein has rejected the scientific method.[23] At the same time, Frankenstein does not claim that it is a miracle, a marvellous event. This confusion over whether the creation is a miracle or the result of scientific study exemplifies the fantastic. Furthermore, Victor sometimes has trouble deciding whether other things that are happening to him, mundane things, are natural or supernatural. For example, close to the end of his story, visions of his murdered family come to him in dreams. He tells Walton that "often, when wearied by a toilsome march [in pursuit of the creature], I persuaded myself that I was dreaming until night should come, and that I should then enjoy reality in the arms of my dearest friends. What agonizing fondness did I feel for them! how did I cling to their dear forms, as sometimes they haunted even my waking hours, and persuade myself that they still lived!"[24] Certainly, the fact that Victor can tell us he has "persuaded himself" seems to demonstrate that he is not really confused. This exclamation, however, follows Victor's claim that his dead family are actually speaking to him from beyond the grave and that good spirits are

helping him to find his way, and even in this passage Victor claims to be haunted. Victor's easy

consideration of the supernatural is remarkable, and the reader may therefore be suspicious about

the status to which Victor assigns the ghosts of his family. The point is not that there are

supernatural events in the novel, of course, but that Victor cannot determine the ontological

status of these events.

Victor's confusion about the nature of reality actually begins earlier in the novel. While

discussing his travels in England, for example, he confesses that, "the whole series of my life

appeared to me as a dream; I sometimes doubted if indeed it were all true, for it never presented

itself to my mind with the force of reality."[25] This confusion between dream and reality is

particularly noteworthy as it follows closely upon a similar characterisation of the creature's

threat to murder Elizabeth: Victor says that the creature's words "appeared like a dream, yet

distinct and oppressive as a reality."[26] In characterising the creature's words, Victor opposes

"dream" and "reality," but makes similes out of both. The words are "*like* a dream, yet . . . *as* a

reality" (emphasis added). The logical implication of this claim is that the words are neither a

dream nor a reality, that they are either somewhere in between or at least indeterminate. Here,

even language can be fantastic.

Victor gives voice to what may be considered the novel's primary lamentation: "Man,

how ignorant art thou in thy pride of wisdom!"[27] While the novel raises general concerns about

the nature of the world, it is even more preoccupied with our ability to know and understand the

world. And in Shelley's novel, questions over the ontological status of events make witnesses of

these events and their stories all the more valuable. That is, because the status is indeterminate, it

is particularly important that we hear from those who might be able to give us evidence. At the

same time, however, their stories become harder and harder to interpret correctly; they do not

effectively communicate knowledge.[28] Critics have largely ignored the questions Shelley's novel raises about the possibility of witnessing, or at least the possibility of reliably recounting what has been witnessed, and the clearest place in which this questioning occurs is in the story itself. One might even say that the novel is about learning not to trust seemingly reliable accounts, given the regularity with which the characters learn this lesson. And it is worth noting that, in this respect, we are in the same position as the characters: as readers, we listen to this incredible story and try to make something of it.

Victor makes several pleas on behalf of allegedly reliable recountings throughout the novel. Near the beginning, he tells Walton that his story proves its own truthfulness. "I do not doubt," he says, "that my tale conveys in its series internal evidence of the truth of the events of which it is composed."[29] But what kind of evidence could be internal to a story? A similar plea Victor makes toward the end of the novel helps to clarify: "The story is too connected to be mistaken for a dream," he says.[30] It seems that the internal evidence to which Victor refers is the story itself, the fact that it is "connected" or logical. In championing this idea—that the connectedness of a story, whether there are clear causes and consequences and whether it makes sense, has some relationship to whether it is true—Victor implicitly claims that witnesses telling their stories can lead us to true conclusions. And by extension, we should believe that the story Victor tells us is true because it is compelling.

Frankenstein, however, consistently undercuts the claim that coherence and truth are necessarily related. Justine's conviction and execution, for example, prove it completely untrue. The evidence that Justine has murdered Victor's brother William is all circumstantial, which is to say that the only evidence against her is a connected story in which she figures as the murderer. It is storytelling alone that convicts Justine. Elizabeth, at first, refuses to allow the, it turns out,

faulty reasoning of the court to persuade her that Justine is guilty. Because Elizabeth "will not be convinced, notwithstanding all the evidence," she is able to see the truth: that Justine has not murdered William.[31] Even she, however, changes her mind after Justine confesses. Justine's confession makes the story of her guilt too coherent to resist. But the story is still faulty; the confession is a lie. Here, storytelling fails to reveal the truth about the world, that Justine is innocent. It is a less likely story that is true. Conversely, Victor is sure that the creature, not Justine, has murdered William, even though he has no basis for this belief. After hearing the evidence against Justine, Victor says, "This was a strange tale, but it did not shake my faith; and I replied earnestly, 'You are all mistaken; I know the murderer.'… Ernest exclaimed, 'Good God, Papa! Victor says that he knows who was the murderer of poor William.' 'We do also, unfortunately,' [their father replied,] 'for indeed I had rather have been for ever ignorant than have discovered [that Justine is guilty].'"[32] When Victor refers to his faith that the creature has killed William, he acknowledges that he has no good reason for his belief, no story to tell.[33] Victor says, however, that he *knows* who the murderer is, the creature. His conflation of faith and knowledge, particularly in a case where his belief happens to be a true one, calls into question the reliability of storytelling: for Victor to arrive at the correct conclusion, he must believe a less connected, unjustified story.

Their father's response emphasises this uncertainty about storytelling in a different way. Their father claims, too, to know who the murderer is, but he believes it to be Justine. He has a good story to support his belief, but the story is misleading, and here storytelling impedes one's ability to arrive at the truth.[34] Both Victor's and their father's uses of "know," then, demonstrate the limits of storytelling. Elizabeth points out these limits more explicitly. After Justine has been executed for murdering William, Elizabeth, having decided again that Justine is innocent,

exclaims to Victor, "Alas! Victor, when falsehood can look so like the truth, who can assure themselves of certain happiness?"[35] The falsehood to which Elizabeth refers is Justine's apparent guilt. Her statement points out the central problem: that one cannot tell the difference between what is true and what is false based on which explanation appears to be true and which explanation appears to be false.

It is not just on a diegetic level, however, that accounts fail in *Frankenstein*. They also prove insufficient for us, the readers of the novel. It is difficult to claim that we witness what we merely read about; however, the figure of Walton operates as a stand-in for the reader, and ultimately Walton fails to make any sense of the stories he hears. On the one hand, Walton is convinced, after hearing the creature's eloquent plea for sympathy, that the creature is merely using his powers of eloquence to delude his listener, as Victor has predicted. On the other hand, he fails to kill the creature when he has the chance, as he tells Victor he will. Richard Dunn calls Walton a sympathetic but distancing narrator, in that he sympathises with Frankenstein but cannot fully engage with his story.[36] His confusion, after seeing the creature and, at least to some degree, throughout the novel, represents what our confusion would be were we present. Similarly, evidence and witnessing fail for us on a meta-diegetic level. We, too, do not know what to make of the novel. We do not sympathise with Victor, who has been supremely irresponsible and obtuse, and while we do sympathise with the creature, it is because we choose to believe that he would have behaved better under better circumstances. We are literally giving him the benefit of the doubt—this doubt that pervades the novel. Fortunately, we cannot see anything but words on a page, and we are thus spared from drawing the false conclusions that would, the novel suggests, inevitably follow from seeing the creature. But we still do not know what to make of the story.

In calling into question the reliability of a connected story and of witnessing, the novel raises significant epistemological difficulties. Of course, the novel need not prove the inadequacies of recounting or interpreting to evince some anxiety over their reliability. Many characters in the novel learn accurate and useful things by relying on witnesses. But almost as often, they do not, and it is this unusual proportion that presents the problem. To be sure, the witnesses are bad ones, but the question is precisely whether or not it is possible to be otherwise. In addition to calling into question the reliability of a witness's story, the novel represents the distance between events and interpretations. This distance reflects larger questions about the reliability of any witness. Even before the story begins, this distance is predicted with the first glimpse of the creature. Walton tells his sister, "we watched the rapid progress of the traveller [the creature] with our telescopes, until he was lost among the distant inequalities of the ice."[37] The telescope both clarifies and mediates his experience of the creature, as the use of amanuenses and of narrative frames will do for the characters and reader throughout the novel.

The use of amanuenses is a recurring device for reflecting distance in the novel. Most significantly, Walton tells us that he will record Victor's story, and at the end of the novel, we learn that Victor has corrected Walton's text. "I have resolved every night," Walton writes to his sister, "when I am not engaged, to record, as nearly as possible in his own words, what he has related during the day. If I should be engaged, I will at least make notes."[38] The fact that Walton writes for Victor represents, metaphorically and literally, another filter between the reader and the events. There is one more opportunity here for events to be interpreted before reaching the readers, Walton's sister and of course us. Then at the end of the story, Walton writes, "Frankenstein discovered that I made notes concerning his history: he asked to see them, and then himself corrected and augmented them in many places; but principally in giving the life and

spirit to the conversations he held with his enemy. 'Since you have preserved my narration,' said he, 'I would not that a mutilated one should go down to posterity.'"[39] While Frankenstein's corrections should prove comforting for the reader, they do not. More than anything, they remind us of the sheer impossibility of Victor's remembering situations perfectly and of the fact that he is, in some sense, speaking for the other characters in the novel.

Another instance that similarly reflects our distance from the data occurs toward the beginning of the novel, when we learn that Clerval has been writing letters, supposedly on Victor's behalf, to Victor's family. In the middle of one of Elizabeth's letters is this reference: "it is now several months since we have seen your hand-writing; and all this time you have been obliged to dictate your letters to Henry."[40] Victor has been doing no such thing, and we infer that Henry has been fabricating letters to spare Victor's family the knowledge of his dire illness. This deceit on Henry's part is an exaggeration of the problem with any less-than-faithful amanuensis, be the intention to deceive or not. The reader is always at a disadvantage when trying to interpret events accurately because of the added distance.

This problem is particularly resonant in an epistolary novel, and ultimately, the story itself embodies the problem through the novel's reminders of its narrative frames. These most often take the form of Victor's interrupting his story to make a comment to Walton. "I see by your eagerness," Victor says to Walton, "and the wonder and hope which your eyes express, my friend, that you expect to be informed of the secret with which I am acquainted; that cannot be."[41] A few minutes later, Victor again says, "But I forget that I am moralizing in the most interesting part of my tale: and your looks remind me to proceed."[42] Similarly, during his story, the creature makes reference to the circumstances of his telling of his story.[43] Such asides pepper the novel, and they remind us of the fact that we are listening to one character's interpretation or

rendition of the story. It is true of course that we are, whether or not we are reminded of it, and for precisely that reason the references serve as peculiar reminders of the mediation between events and what we read of them.

Because of the novel's structure, there is always some filter through which the story passes, some or many witnesses of the various events.[44] The reliability of these witnesses then affects our interpretation of the story. Victor is a particularly bad filter, as his sanity is always in question. He begins by insisting that he is not mad. "Remember, I am not recording the vision of a madman," he tells Walton. "The sun does not more certainly shine in the heavens, than that which I now affirm is true."[45] But Victor himself raises the possibility that he is not in his right mind. He does not tell anyone about the creature during Justine's trial because he is sure no one will believe him. He says, "I remembered also the nervous fever with which I had been seized just at the time that I dated my creation, and which would give an air of delirium to a tale otherwise so utterly improbable."[46] The reader remembers it, too, and while we do not seriously doubt that Victor has created his monster, we do recognise that his possible madness is important on a diegetic level, to the characters, when trying to determine what is true and what is delusion.

Whether or not Victor is mad is one of the text's central preoccupations, and as the story progresses he seems more and more to be so. Symptoms of madness arise as soon as Victor brings the creature to life. When Clerval appears at the university, for example, Victor "was unable to remain for a single instant in the same place; I jumped over the chairs," he says, "clapped my hands, and laughed aloud. Clerval at first attributed my unusual spirits to joy on his arrival; but when he observed me more attentively, he saw a wildness in my eyes for which he could not account; and my loud, unrestrained, heartless laughter, frightened and astonished him."[47] This is the fever to which Victor refers above, and it is easy to see why it might be

mistaken for madness. Victor's behaviour raises a similar question about his sanity when he finally tells his sad story to the magistrate before setting off in search of the creature, for example. He "trembled with excess of agitation…; there was a phrenzy in my manner," he says, "and something, I doubt not, of that haughty fierceness, which the martyrs of old are said to have possessed. But to a Genevan magistrate, whose mind was occupied by far other ideas than those of devotion and heroism, this elevation of mind had much the appearance of madness."[48] This is the first time that Victor has dared tell his story to anyone, and the magistrate, who is essentially a realist character, does not believe one word. It appears to be madness to the reader, who is in a situation parallel to the magistrate's, as well, and Victor does eventually conclude that he is insane. In fact, some of his protestations are almost comical. He asks Walton, "can you wonder, that sometimes a kind of insanity possessed me, or that I saw continually about me a multitude of filthy animals inflicting on me incessant torture, that often extorted screams and bitter groans?"[49] Such admissions make it difficult to think of Victor as a reliable filter. Indeed, Frankenstein's reliability is consistently undermined throughout the novel, not just within the story but in relation to the reader. This undermining begins early with the reader's alienation from Victor, whose decisions to abandon the creature and let Justine take the blame for William's murder, in the first volume of the novel, the reader finds unsupportable. The second volume culminates with Victor's hesitation to help the creature, a hesitation due entirely to the creature's appearance after the creature's story has won the reader's sympathy. And in the third volume, Victor's ability to interpret his own story disintegrates completely. For example, Victor tells Walton that, "sometimes, when nature, overcome by hunger, sunk under the exhaustion, a repast was prepared for me in the desert, that restored and inspirited me. The fare was indeed coarse, such as the peasants of the country ate; but I may not doubt that it was set there by the spirits that I had

invoked to aid me."[50] Moments later, he describes to Walton one of many messages the creature has left for him. The creature writes, "You will find near this place,… a dead hare; eat and be refreshed."[51] It is perfectly obvious to the reader that it is the creature who is leaving food for Victor, but Victor is so determined to detest the creature that such a possibility never occurs to him. Of course, sometimes Victor is simply mistaken about what has occurred, but more disturbing are the discrepancies between his and the reader's interpretations. These discrepancies are the measure of Victor's unreliability as a narrator.[52]

The penultimate scene details Walton's admission of the extent of Victor's madness and the consequences of that madness. He says of Victor that "he enjoys one comfort, the offspring of solitude and delirium: he believes, that, when in dreams he holds converse with his friends, and derives from that communion consolation for his miseries, or excitements to his vengeance, that they are not the creations of his fancy, but the real beings who visit him from the regions of a remote world. This faith gives a solemnity to his reveries that render them to me almost as imposing and interesting as truth."[53] Victor cannot tell the difference, here, between "creations of his fancy" and "real beings," and Walton claims that Victor's "reveries" are like "truth." These juxtapositions and confusions highlight the fact that Victor is a particularly bad filter for us as we try to draw conclusions about what must have happened. He is an inadequate witness and his stories are untrustworthy. And of course the implication of Victor's unreliability is the larger unreliability of any account, of any story.

It is more than the reliability of witnessing, though, that generates the fundamental doubt in the novel. One of the most important moments in the creature's life is his realisation that the cottagers he watches communicate through language. This realisation leads him to learn their language, and it ultimately turns him into an eloquent speaker. He says, of his discovery, "I

found that these people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds. I perceived that the words they spoke sometimes produced pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness, in the minds and countenances of the hearers. This was indeed a godlike science."[54] Language is god-like because it produces such dramatic effects, and it is a science because it attempts to describe the world. It turns out that the creature is wrong, that language cannot always communicate "experience and feelings," or in fact subjectivity, adequately.[55] Peter Brooks similarly notes, about the variety of languages in the novel, "This well-ordered Babel calls attention to the fact and problem of transmission and communication."[56]

Several times in the novel the characters make explicit that language is inadequate for representing their experience. Walton begins his letters by admitting that "paper is a poor medium for the communication of feeling."[57] In saying so, he means most literally that it is hard for him to do justice to his feelings in this letter to his sister. At first glance it seems that he would be able to express himself better by speaking to her in person. But there are no words or structures available to him in speech that are not available to him in writing. What talking to someone face-to-face makes possible is non-verbal communication. If "paper is a poor medium," it is because one needs more than language to communicate. In lamenting the limits of a letter as the novel begins, then, Walton is expressing the limitations of language.

Of course, it is not just Walton who thinks of language as a poor medium. Most characters, at some point, question the ability of language to represent feelings; Frankenstein regularly bemoans his inability to express himself. For example, after bringing the creature to life, Frankenstein asks, "how can I describe my emotions?"[58] He cannot, he concludes. His feelings are beyond the reach of language. Similarly, when Justine is wrongfully condemned, he

exclaims, "I cannot pretend to describe what I then felt. I had before experienced sensations of horror; and I have endeavoured to bestow upon them adequate expressions, but words cannot convey an idea of the heart-sickening despair that I then endured."[59] And all of the narrators find themselves at a loss for words. Like Victor, the creature "cannot describe… the agony that [his] reflections inflicted."[60] Such declarations occur throughout the novel from every character, reminding the reader of the tenuous relationship between certain instances of language and what it would represent. Similarly, our narrators are occasionally silent. "I attempted to speak," Walton tells us, "but the words died away on my lips."[61] Frankenstein, too, "resolve[s] to remain silent" when he is afraid no one will believe his tale.[62] This silence is a recognition of the limits of language, that it is inadequate for expression or for convincing someone of the truth. Along the same lines, Krishna Banerji argues, "For the complex emotions and reactions that literary men wanted to express, established patterns of language were inadequate. Gothic writers were engaged in overcoming the problem, and in the effort at expressing the inexpressible their early efforts were replete with supernatural machinery and extravagant language."[63]

Brooks writes, of language in the novel,

> If the Monster's story demonstrates that the godlike science of language is a supplement to a deficient nature, an attempt to overcome a central gap or lack of being, the inner and outer frames—Frankenstein's narrative and Walton's letters—indicate that language never can overcome the gap, that the chain established has no privileged limits, no mode of reference, but signifies purely as a chain, a system or series in which everything is mutually interrelated and interdependent but without any transcendent signified.[64]

We need not go as far as Brooks to see that the inability to express oneself through language reflects badly on the ability of language to represent a self. More subtly, for example, language tends to persuade the characters of untruths or it fails to represent a character's experience of the world.[65] This failure becomes a pattern in the novel, first evident in Justine's inability to

convince people that she is innocent of William's murder. The story Justine tells, while true, is unpersuasive. She says, "I do not pretend that my protestations should acquit me: I rest my innocence on a plain and simple explanation of the facts which have been adduced against me; and I hope the character I have always borne will incline my judges to a favourable interpretation, where any circumstance appears doubtful or suspicious."[66] Justine acknowledges, here, that her "character" will require "interpretation," that while she can tell her side of the story, she cannot precisely convey her experience of the world, her subjective reality. If she could convey it, the jury would understand her innocence. As it is, her explanation is unsuccessful and her hope is unfounded. Language about experience, here, is powerless.

The language of the creature, too, is unable to undo the terror that his appearance wreaks. He cannot convince people of his true temperament or get them to do what he wants. Victor, after hearing the creature's sad tale, admits, "his words had a strange effect upon me. I compassionated him, and sometimes felt a wish to console him; but when I looked upon him, when I saw the filthy mass that moved and talked, my heart sickened, and my feelings were altered to those of horror and hatred."[67] The creature's language here, while moving and true, is nothing compared with his appearance. Again, while the creature can tell his side of the story, he cannot adequately communicate his experience of the world. His story does temporarily persuade Victor to create a mate, but Victor soon changes his mind and pursues the creature with even greater hatred. Even Walton, at the end of the novel, says, "I was at first touched by the expressions of his misery; yet when I called to mind what Frankenstein had said of his powers of eloquence and persuasion, and when I again cast my eyes on the lifeless form of my friend, indignation was rekindled within me."[68] The creature is unable to convey what it means to be an outcast, what his world is like, through a medium as faulty as language. Walton's glance at

Frankenstein is more powerful than the creature's plea for understanding. It turns out that language is particularly fallible when attempting to represent emotional experience or subjectivity.

"Mine has been a tale of horrors," Victor tells Walton, as he draws near the end of his tale."[69] Victor is right. And the use of "horrors" here invokes the gothic tradition that *Frankenstein* is relying on and transforming. Issues of doubt and representation coalesce in *Frankenstein*, a text deeply anxious about the reliability of language. Most critics who have considered the gothic nature of Shelley's novel draw conclusions about gender, nationality, or Shelley's biography, but perhaps more important are the philosophical questions that a gothic form allows Shelley to raise. *Frankenstein* evinces doubts about the Enlightenment project of describing the world—about the ability of language to represent what is truly important: human subjectivity. The gothic novel thus becomes a site for exploring and expressing these larger cultural anxieties.

The reader is left, not just with the doubt that the novel instils, but with the strange knowledge that, in circumscribing the limits of representation, the novel has in a very real way represented the problem of the Enlightenment. And in garnering sympathy for the creature, the novel has managed to represent his struggles effectively. It is the gaps in the text—that which is absent—that manages to represent more effectively than what is present. Such irony is no consolation for the creature, however, whose murder of Elizabeth is the culmination of his revenge against Victor. Yet while his revenge is complete, his victory is not. The creature mourns Victor's death with the grief of an orphan, and then concludes that he himself has no more reason to live. What the creature wants, it turns out, is not vengeance at all, but a language powerful enough to convey to others his heartbreaking experience of the world.

[1] Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus: The 1818 Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 140.

[2] Ibid., 165.

[3] George E. Haggerty, *Gothic Fiction/Gothic Form* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 30.

[4] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 31.

[5] Susan Stewart, "The Epistemology of the Horror Story" (*Journal of American Folklore*, 95.375, 1982, 33-50), 44.

[6] Elizabeth MacAndrew, *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 111.

[7] Mark M. Hennelly, Jr., "Melmoth the Wanderer and Gothic Existentialism" (*Studies in English Literature* 21.4, 1981, 665-79), 674-75.

[8] Ioan Williams, ed., *Sir Walter Scott on Novelists and Fiction* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), 1.

[9] Still, there are traces of the gothic in some of Scott's novels, places where the influence of traditional gothic novels is apparent. In fact, Elizabeth MacAndrew argues that "some of Scott's works could also be called 'borderline' Gothic in the same sense *Caleb [Williams]* is. In some novels, he bends all his energies toward an illusion of real historical time and in these he avoids Gothic techniques. But in others he mingles legend, Scottish superstition, and 'historical' events in a manner that creates at least a Gothic atmosphere" (*The Gothic Tradition in Fiction*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1979, 143). Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor* is a good example of the novels MacAndrew describes. Of course, these are not the novels that anticipate Victorian Realism, though many Victorian novels do mingle realist and gothic strategies. The more influential of Scott's novels were the proto-realistic ones, those I am discussing here.

[10] Elliot Engel and Margaret F. King, *The Victorian Novel Before Victoria: British Fiction during the Reign of William IV, 1830-37* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 30.

[11] Harry E. Shaw, *Narrating Reality: Austen, Scott, Eliot* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 108.

[12] George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 35.

[13] Walter Scott, "Review of *Emma*" (*Quarterly Review* 14, 1816), 192-93.

[14] Levine, 38.

[15] Shelley, 130.

[16] Jerrold Hogle, "*Frankenstein* as Neo-Gothic: From the Ghost of the Counterfeit to the Monster of Abjection" in Tilottama Rajan and Julia M. Wright, eds., *Romanticism, History, and the Possibilities of Genre: Re-forming Literature, 1789-1837* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[17] This use follows Tzvetan Todorov's definition of the fantastic. Todorov writes that the "fantastic occupies the duration of [an] uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (*The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975], 25). The uncanny is something that turns out to be natural, and the marvelous is something that turns out to be unnatural.

[18] Shelley, 33-34.

[19] Margaret L. Carter, *Specter or Delusion? The Supernatural in Gothic Fiction* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1987), 20. Carter further explains the preternatural by saying that its "events are outside the boundaries of nature as we know it but are not supernatural in the traditional sense—the true explanation lies in scientific laws yet unknown to the majority of men" (66).

[20] Mary Shelley admitted, many years after the first edition of *Frankenstein* was published, that Percy Shelley had written the preface. That fact is not particularly relevant, here, as this inquiry is concerned only with the text's narrative and meta-narrative, not with the circumstances surrounding the production of the text.

[21] Shelley, 3.

[22] Ibid., 34.

[23] Samuel Holmes Vasbinder, *Scientific Attitudes in Mary Shelley's* Frankenstein (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1976).

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[24] Ibid., 173-74.

[25] Ibid., 150.

[26] Ibid., 142.

[27] Ibid., 170.

[28] In the language of epistemology, we say someone knows a thing if she has a justified, true belief. In other words, a certain proposition, say, that a creature has been brought to life, must be true, the person in question must believe it to be true, and she must have good reasons for believing it to be true, in order for her to know it. If any of these criteria are not met, the person does not have knowledge, but something else, such as faith or a misapprehension. A belief may be justified either rationally or empirically.

[29] Shelley, 17.

[30] Ibid., 169.

[31] Ibid., 59.

[32] Ibid.

[33] In the language of epistemology, he has an unjustified true belief.

[34] He has a justified untrue belief.

[35] Shelley, 72.

[36] Richard Dunn, "Narrative Distance in *Frankenstein*" (*Studies in the Novel* 6.4, 1974), 408-17.

[37] Ibid., 12.

[38] Ibid., 18.

[39] Ibid., 179.

[40] Ibid., 45.

[41] Ibid., 35.

[42] Ibid., 38. Other examples appear in volume three, first when Frankenstein has reassumed the narrator's role, he says, "Pardon this gush of sorrow; these ineffectual words are but a slight tribute to the unexampled worth of Henry, but they soothe my heart, overflowing with the anguish which his remembrance creates. I will proceed with my tale" (130). Then again, "I must pause here; for it requires all my fortitude to recall the memory of the frightful events which I am about to relate, in proper detail to my recollection" (146). And then, "My own strength is exhausted; I must tell, in a few words, what remains of my hideous narration" (167).

[43] Ibid., 99, 105.

[44] See Seymour Chatman for a definition and discussion of narrative filters: *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978).

[45] Shelley, 34.

[46] Ibid., 57.

[47] Ibid., 42-43.

[48] Ibid., 170.

[49] Ibid., 123.

[50] Ibid., 173.

[51] Ibid., 174.

[52] Ansgar Nünning would call Frankenstein not unreliable but untrustworthy, since he reports most events accurately but then misinterprets them: "'But why will you say that I am mad?' On the Theory, History, and Signals of Unreliable Narration in British Fiction" (*AAA—Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 22.1, 1997), 83-105. I use the term "unreliable" for narrators who are both mistaken and misinterpreting.

[53] Ibid., 179.

[54] Ibid., 88.

[55] Chris Baldick notes that "The decision to give the monster an articulate voice is Mary Shelley's most important subversion of the category of monstrosity. . . . For the reader of *Frankenstein*, though, as for the blind De Lacey, the visibility of the monster means nothing and his eloquence means everything for his identity" (*In* Frankenstein*'s Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987], 45). Of course, neither we nor De Lacey have any material bearing on the creature's fate.

[56] Peter Brooks, "'Godlike Science/Unhallowed Arts': Language, Nature, and Monstrosity" in George Levine and U. C. Knoepflmacher, eds., *The Endurance of Frankenstein* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979, 205-20), 210.

[57] Shelley, 8.

[58] Ibid., 39.

[59] Ibid., 65.

[60] Ibid., 96.

[61] Ibid., 187.

[62] Ibid., 57.

[63] Krishna Banerji, "Enlightenment and Romanticism in the Gothic: A Study of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*," in Visvanath Chatterjee, ed., *The Romantic Tradition* (Calcutta: Jadavpur University, 1984, 95-105) 100.

[64] Brooks, 220.

[65] Banerji notes similarly, "Thus certain reservations seem to exist in Mary Shelley's acceptance of Godwin's philosophy: rationalism carried to such extremes that it denies the emotions and affections of the heart is unproductive, even destructive, this seems to be her implicit comment" (98).

[66] Shelley, 62.

[67] Ibid., 121.

[68] Ibid., 188.

[69] Ibid., 167.