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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

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 her. 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

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—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

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, b

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 characterization 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 characterizing the creature's words, Victor opposes "dream" and "reality," but makes similes out of both. The words are "like a dream, yet . . . as 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 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 convict-1(t)-2eit isJ 0.002 mqt-1(t)-2 1(J 0.00n)-4(ken)-ts the

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

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

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

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 659.502(…)]TJ coe

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 conve

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 subjectivity. 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 cann-2(s)-1(P4(pp)-10(e)4(a)er)-1(h)-14(ear)as e

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 him.

[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 12(f)4(c) Td [(W)B the 241 0 Td (192)

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[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] Banerj 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.