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## ***Frankenstein*, Invisibility, and Nameless Dread**

Early in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1831), Victor Frankenstein tells Captain Walton: "No human being could have passed a happier childhood than myself. My parents were possessed by the very spirit of kindness and indulgence" (43). But is what he says true? Is Victor's claim borne out by the details of his narrative? I would like to propose that it is not, that it is idealized and defensive, and that just as the monster suffers from parentlessness, so too does Victor, who is his double. The monster's story of emotional abandonment is Victor's story.

One might suppose this would hardly be worth taking the trouble to argue, given the common view that, as George Levine puts it, "the hero and his antagonist are one" (1973, 209) and "the monster can be taken as an expression of an aspect of Frankenstein's self . . . re-enacting in mildly disguised ways, his creator's feelings and experiences" (209–10). But this insight has not informed most readings of Victor's early life. Indeed, a chorus of responses—all notable enough to be collected in the Norton Critical Edition (Hunter 1996) of the novel—despite their differences, unites in taking Victor's glowing report at face value. Strikingly, Levine himself writes that "Frankenstein's father . . . in caring for him, behaves to his son as the monster would have Frankenstein behave" (211). Christopher Small sees in Victor's upbringing an "atmosphere of perfect love, harmony, and parental indulgence" (1972, 102), and he calls Victor's father "benevolent . . . wise . . . altogether un-authoritarian" (103). For Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Victor's "Edenic childhood is an interlude of prelapsarian innocence in which, like Adam, he is sheltered by his benevolent father" (1979, 231); while for Mary Poovey he is "the son of loving, protective parents" who provide the "harmony of his childhood" (1984, 122); and for Ellen Moers he experiences "doting parents" (1976, 98). Typifying the way that Victor is

often *contrasted* with his double in this respect, Barbara Johnson sees the novel as “the story of two antithetical modes of parenting that give rise to two increasingly parallel lives—the life of Victor Frankenstein, who is the beloved child of two doting parents, and the life of the monster . . . who is immediately spurned and abandoned by his creator” (1982, 242).

In counterpoint to this apparent consensus, Anne K. Mellor draws attention to “the many ways in which *Frankenstein* portrays the consequences of the failure of family, the damage wrought when the mother—or a nurturant parental love—is absent” (1988, 39). Like the above chorus, however, Mellor focuses on the consequences of Victor’s absencing himself from the monster. Indeed, she echoes Johnson’s opposition between Victor and the monster’s experiences of their parents: “Throughout the novel, Frankenstein’s callous disregard of his responsibility as the sole parent of his only child is contrasted to the examples of two loving fathers” (43–44), one of whom is Alphonse Frankenstein (the other being the father of the De Lacey family).<sup>1</sup>

Everyone agrees, at least, that the monster suffers a horrible abandonment, and Mellor reads his murderousness as a measure of it, seeing in Victor “a classic case of a battering parent who produces a battered child who in turn becomes a battering parent: the creature’s first murder victim . . . is a small child whom he wishes to adopt” (43). But why start the chain with Victor?<sup>2</sup> Doesn’t this “battering parent” have parents of his own? Does he not himself suffer the absence of “nurturant parental love”?

My approach to the monster’s story of deprivation as a double of Victor’s own is inflected by a particular psychoanalytic way of thinking. Going against the grain of Freudian and Lacanian readings, I invoke an object relations perspective that explores the centrality of an infant’s early experiences with primary caretakers and of the intense feelings of love and hate that, even on the surface, are the main concern of *Frankenstein*.<sup>3</sup> Although Melanie Klein pioneered the notion that the self is constituted by intense early relationships, it was D. W. Winnicott, following the lead of W. R. D. Fairbairn, who

stressed how the particular “facilitating environment” shapes these relationships. By, at the outset, supporting the infant’s feeling of omnipotence without prematurely abrogating it, and by presenting the external world with a flexibility that accommodates the infant’s creativity rather than too rigidly or hastily imposing “reality”—by acknowledging, in short, the authenticity of the infant’s being—the parents help to constitute a mediating “*potential space* between the individual and the environment” (Winnicott 1967a, 100). This transitional realm helps “the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated” (Winnicott 1953, 2). The infant’s disposition is important, but for Winnicott much depends upon the child’s earliest relations with others who may respond either in a “good-enough” way that allows his or her “true self” to emerge or by imposing rigid structures that leave the child in a “false” position, caught between an endangered inner world that can’t be made known and an unresponsive external world that refuses to know it.

The latter condition haunts *Frankenstein*. Victor himself stresses the perdurability of early relationships, telling Walton that “the companions of our childhood always possess a certain power over our minds, which hardly any later friend can obtain. They know our infantine dispositions, which, however they may be afterwards modified, are never eradicated” (Shelley 1831, 176). But there is more—or less—to his early years than benevolent “companions” and “friends.” Just as the monster is abandoned by Victor, so too Victor is abandoned—psychically and emotionally—by his ostensibly “doting” parents, who never acknowledge or strive to accommodate his inner world, and instead inflict their own version of reality on him.<sup>4</sup>

This parental world suppresses imagination, desire, troubling emotions, and spontaneity—everything that eludes reason and instrumentality. Victor introduces his father exclusively as a public man, without a private self, and defined utterly by his position in the social order. He had passively “filled several public situations with honor and reputation” (38); he was “respected” for “indefatigable attention to public business”; and his imagination and emotions were prematurely supplanted as “he passed his younger days perpetually occu-

pied by the affairs of his country.” When, late in life, he finally marries, it hardly signals a delayed eruption of passion. His “love” for his wife Caroline is a pale derivative of “a sense of justice” and of an accountant’s concern with “recompensing her for the sorrows she had endured” due to her father’s loss of fortune, illness, and death (39). Alphonse’s conviction that all emotions can be trumped by rational appeals to duty and instrumentality is typified in his response to Victor’s looming despair after his brother William’s murder and the family servant Justine’s death:

My father observed with pain the alteration perceptible in my disposition and habits, and endeavored by arguments deduced from the feelings of his serene conscience and guiltless life, to inspire me with fortitude, and awaken in me the courage to dispel the dark cloud which brooded over me. “Do you think, Victor,” said he, “that I do not suffer also? No one could love a child more than I loved your brother;” (tears came into his eyes . . . ) “but is it not a duty to the survivors, that we should refrain from augmenting their unhappiness by an appearance of immoderate grief? It is also a duty owed to yourself; for excessive sorrow prevents improvement or enjoyment, or even the discharge of daily usefulness, without which no man is fit for society.” (83)

Such a dismissing not only of the claims of grief, but of all aspects of the nonrational, structures Victor’s childhood. “In my education, my father had taken the greatest precautions,” he tells Walton, “that my mind should be impressed with no supernatural horrors. I do not ever remember to have trembled at a tale of superstition” (53). The child’s primitive fears aren’t recognized and negotiated—aren’t contained by a narrative—but are, rather, systematically disallowed.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in describing his “ideal” infancy, Victor inadvertently suggests that this premature dismissal—a kind of emotional abandonment akin to what the monster suffers—marks his experience from the start. I have cautioned against taking him at his word as he generalizes about his childhood, but here Victor thinks he’s *praising* his parents:

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My mother's tender caresses, and my father's smile of benevolent pleasure while regarding me, are my first recollections. I was their plaything and their idol, and something better—their child, the innocent and helpless creature bestowed on them by Heaven, whom to bring up to good and whose future lot it was in their hands to direct to happiness or misery, according as they fulfilled their duties towards me. With this deep conviction of what they owed towards the being to which they had given life, added to the active spirit of tenderness that animated both, it may be imagined that while during every hour of my infant life I received a lesson of patience, of charity, and of self-control, I was so guided by a silken cord, that all seemed but one train of enjoyment to me. (40)

His father's "smile of benevolent pleasure" and mother's "tender caresses" might ordinarily suggest recognition and love, but that doesn't square with Victor's being objectified as a "plaything" or the sense of "duty" and "owing" that defines his relationship to his parents (and their world-view in general). One might object that this "duty" is merely "added to" a "spirit of tenderness," but look again at how the sentence continues: "every hour of my infant life I received a lesson of patience, of charity, and of self-control."

Is this an ideal "infant life"? "Lessons," passively received every hour, preempt any sense of authentic being. The lesson of "patience" entails the imposition of an alienating structure of time, a premature violation of the sense of early omnipotence; the lesson of "charity" precludes the infant from spontaneously having something to give, so that the claims of otherness disallow those of selfhood; the lesson of "self-control" thwarts playfulness and passion.<sup>6</sup> What kind of self can develop in the face of such an onslaught? Even—or especially—the murderous rage (and guilt) that such self-obliteration is likely to fuel has no standing, cannot be spoken, must be split off and disowned (as the monster); and so Victor defensively idealizes his first hours as an uninterrupted "train of enjoyment."

William Veeder's reading of the passage suggests the way that those who share Victor's idealization of his childhood disregard the undertone of tyranny. Actually, Veeder wants to defend Alphonse from what he sees as Victor's self-justifying attribution of his fate to his father's failures. But while Victor provides copious evidence from which inferences about his father's failures can be drawn, he himself only rarely and mildly broaches those conclusions, insisting, as I have suggested, mostly on his father's goodness and blaming mainly himself. By minimizing Victor's few "complaints" as "convenient pretexts" (1986, 138), Veeder detaches them from the context that would allow us to see them as tips of the iceberg. Despite his important caution that "we must . . . remain alive to distinctions between . . . Victor's assertion and our experience of it," he takes Victor's word for the overall happiness of his childhood and clings to the prevailing idealization of Alphonse. (Perhaps he does so in part because he assumes a Freudian framework, seeing early conflicts as oedipal and relatively invariant, rather than a relational one that stresses preoedipal experience and its variability.<sup>7</sup>) He does register Victor's discontent in the "lessons" passage, but immediately discredits it:

"Seemed" and "cord" indicate Victor's sense of insecurity and constraint. But since every child doubts parental love occasionally and since every child is bound to parental will indubitably, the question is whether "seemed" and "cord" justify a sense of estrangement as enormous as Victor's becomes. Is Mary [Shelley] not insisting upon the facts of life—that even this virtually ideal home cannot be perfect, that tension will exist in any human relationship? (142–43)

Veeder can see Victor as having a "virtually ideal home" only by reducing his "complaint" to the nuances of "seemed" and "cord," while making no mention of the tyrannical "lessons" of patience, charity, and self-control, repeated every hour. Indeed, he defines these oppressive conditions as incontestable "facts of life," as if any such "facts" were not social constructions and all forms of "parental will" were one and the same.

If we turn from Victor's generalizing about his parents to the scenes he actually describes, we see the lessons enacted. The first time we encounter Alphonse in action as a father—and the first time he speaks in the novel—he dismisses young Victor's "enthusiasm" for an alchemical volume by Cornelius Agrippa (Shelley 1831, 44). Veeder predictably counts this "a minor mistake," and normalizes it by asking, "What parent has not missed by at least this much the proper tone in a random moment?" (1986, 139). For Poovey, Alphonse "neglects to explain Agrippa's obsolescence," and the episode is simply an "accident" (1984, 253), while for Mellor he merely "failed to monitor sufficiently closely" Victor's reading (1988, 50). But what is at stake in this exchange isn't so much *what* Victor has read, but *how* what he has read has affected his entire state of mind. The book fires his passion and imagination, and he immediately wants to validate his intense experience by making it shareable: "A new light seemed to dawn upon my mind; and, bounding with joy"—and thus defying the infantile lessons of patience and self-control—"I communicated my discovery to my father" (Shelley 1831, 44).

Alphonse doesn't get the point of his son's enthusiasm: "My father looked carelessly at the titlepage of my book, and said, 'Ah! Cornelius Agrippa! My dear Victor, do not waste your time upon this; it is sad trash'" (44). By failing to receive his son's eagerly proffered communication, Alphonse cannot present the external world in a way that recognizes and affirms the inner one; what might have become a "potential space" between subject and object instead remains a vacuum. Belatedly, Victor's benevolent professor, M. Waldman, does recognize some value in Cornelius Agrippa and modulates Victor's enthusiastic understanding by adding to it his own, more experienced, perspective. Alphonse, however, flatly denies Victor's passion and seeks to foist on him his own rigid and narrowly rationalistic world-view.

That this is the first detailed exchange between Victor and his father in the novel might in itself qualify it as something more than a "minor mistake" or an "accident." But its significance is crucially reinforced by Victor's emphasis on the inadequacy of his father's *looking*: "My father looked carelessly

at the titlepage of my book. . . . [T]he cursory glance my father had taken of my volume by no means assured me that he was acquainted with its contents" (Shelley 1831, 44). Indeed, *Frankenstein* is pervaded by an anxious preoccupation with glances of recognition. When Captain Walton suffers the absence of someone to "participate [in] my joy" or to "sustain me in dejection," he expresses this absence in terms of not being properly seen: "I desire the company of a man who could sympathize with me; whose eyes would reply to mine" (28). The first thing the just-made monster seeks is just such sympathetic eye contact: "his eyes," Victor relates, "were fixed on me. His jaws opened . . . while a grin wrinkled his cheeks" (58). And according to Shelley's introduction, her inspiration for the novel derived from her vision of the pale student's creation "looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes" (23).

But the monster's predicament, which literalizes Victor's, is precisely that his sympathetic looks *cannot* be returned. After his abandonment and troubled early wandering, he can join the loving De Lacey family only invisibly, as, from his hiding place, he regards their "interchanging each day looks of affection and kindness" (99). He reveals himself solely to the blind father, and when the others return, instead of requiting his kind look, they evince "horror and consternation on beholding" him (117). In some sense, *Frankenstein* takes as its central subject the longing to be truly seen, as well as the despair about whether such recognition is possible; and Alphonse's "cursory glance" epitomizes the self-denying "lessons" that structure Victor's early experience.

The intensity of the novel's preoccupation with sympathetic looking anticipates Winnicott's emphasis on the importance, for the emerging self, of the mother's face. As he describes it, a sense of meaningful selfhood is in large measure constructed from the infant's earliest experiences of being seen and recognized. "What does the baby see," Winnicott asks, "when he or she looks at the mother's face?" (1967b, 112). Optimally, "what the baby sees is himself or herself. In other words the mother is looking at the baby and *what she looks like is related to what she sees there.*" Although he calls the



mother's face a "mirror," it is responsive to what it reflects, so that the baby gets back not merely itself but also the mother. These early moments of the coming together of internal and external worlds make both seem real.<sup>8</sup> The consequences for babies who "have a long experience of not getting back what they are giving," who "look and . . . do not see themselves," are that "perception takes the place of apperception, perception takes the place of that which might have been the beginning of a significant exchange with the world, a two-way process in which self-enrichment alternates with the discovery of meaning in the world of seen things" (112–13).

Thus, while looking is an excruciatingly literal concern in *Frankenstein*, it is also a figure for recognition of all sorts. In this sense, Victor's early "lessons" are lessons in invisibility, and the novel centers on a creature *defined* by the impossibility of being sympathetically seen. On her deathbed, with the incontrovertible authority of last words, Victor's mother Caroline poses his relationship with his adopted sister Elizabeth entirely in terms of their parents' needs: "My children,' she said, 'my firmest hopes of future happiness were placed on the prospect of your union. This expectation will now be the consolation of your father'" (Shelley 1831, 47). Victor's own desire doesn't enter into the equation, nor, for that matter, does Elizabeth's: she is scripted to be not only a wife but also a mother, who, Caroline orders, "must supply my place to my younger children."

That this union would entail not a fulfillment of his own desire but a capitulation to his mother's is confirmed by Victor's "wild dream" after the monster's birth, where "Elizabeth" is merely a screen for Caroline. No wonder Victor seems not only not drawn *to* Elizabeth, but consistently drawn *away* from her. Victor *says* he loves her, but, again, it's useful to attend to the difference between what he says and what he does: if he were so eager for Elizabeth, there would be no reason to keep on stalling. He finally, reluctantly, goes through with the marriage, but what gets consummated isn't his desire, but rather his unacknowledged rage at seeming to have no other choice.

Victor's procrastination doesn't escape Elizabeth's notice, of course, and she has more than an inkling of its meaning. She writes to him:

“You well know, Victor, that our union had been the favorite plan of your parents ever since our infancy. We were told this when young, and taught to look forward to it as an event that would certainly take place. . . . You have traveled; you have spent several years of your life at Ingolstadt; and I confess to you, my friend, that when I saw you last autumn so unhappy, flying to solitude, from the society of every creature, I could not help supposing that you might regret our connection, and believe yourself bound in honor to fulfil the wishes of your parents, though they opposed themselves to your inclinations.” (157)

In response, Victor recommits himself to the marriage in terms that evince his early lessons in self-obliteration: “I resolved . . . that if my immediate union with my cousin would conduce either to hers or my father’s happiness, my adversary’s designs against my life should not retard it a single hour” (159).

The infantile lessons, indeed, are repeated virtually “every hour” of his adult life. Forgetting them for a moment, Victor finally attempts to give voice to the disavowed intensities of his inner world and the history of its invisibility. In despair that his father “did not know the origin of my sufferings” and that he “sought erroneous methods to remedy the incurable ill” by lamely advising Victor “to seek amusement in society,” Victor blurts out, “Alas! my father . . . how little do you know me” (155). And he voices the consequences of his rage at being so little known: “I am the cause of this—I murdered [Justine]. William, Justine, and Henry [Clerval, his only friend]—they all died by my hands” (155–56).<sup>9</sup> Alphonse fails to acknowledge even this overt expression of his son’s inner world, dismissing it as madness and, once again, telling him in the most affectionate terms to shut up: “My dearest Victor, what infatuation is this? My dear son, I entreat you never to make such an assertion again” (156). When Victor remonstrates, Alphonse “instantly changed the subject of our conversation and endeavored to alter the course of my thoughts. He . . . never alluded to [the scenes in Ireland], or suffered me to speak of my misfortune.” When, a short time later, Victor lets slip a melan-

cholic word, Alphonse repeats, “My dear Victor, do not speak thus” (160). “Such were the lessons of my father,” the son remarks, thereby inviting us to read these later episodes as haunted by the infantile lessons.

Another telling instance of how Victor’s infantile dilemma haunts his later years involves his awakening from delirium in an Irish jail, imprisoned under suspicion of killing Clerval. His condition here approximates an infant’s not only in his helplessness, but also in his having to contend with intense anxiety and guilt and in his difficulty in establishing the external world *as* external: “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” (150).<sup>10</sup> While Winnicott stresses the parents’ role in helping the child to establish an intermediate realm indispensable to the “perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated” (1953, 2), the nurse and physician in the jail, like Caroline and Alphonse, do their material “duty” (as the nurse puts it, echoing one of Alphonse’s guiding words) by Victor, but staunchly decline to engage with, and thus contain, his emotional state. Indeed, at the center of this breakdown is once again the failure to be genuinely *seen*, and Victor’s disappointment centers on cold looks and cursory glances: “The lines on [the nurse’s] face were hard and rude, like that of persons accustomed to *see without sympathizing* in sights of misery. . . . The physician came and prescribed medicines, and the old woman prepared them for me; but utter carelessness was visible in the first, and the expression of brutality was strongly marked in the visage of the second” (Shelley 1831, 150; italics added).

Victor’s reproaches echo those of the monster. “No one was near me who soothed me with the gentle voice of love; no dear hand supported me” (150), he protests, just as the monster bemoans that “No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses” (107). When, imprisoned in invisibility, the monster watches the De Laceys from his “very bare” room (97), he avers that “my heart yearned to be known and loved by these amiable creatures: to see their sweet looks directed towards me with affection. . . . I

asked . . . for greater treasures than a little food or rest: I required kindness and sympathy” (115). Indeed, if we take the monster’s tale as the autobiography of the unseen Victor, Victor’s traumatic reenactment of his infantile experience in the Irish jail is perhaps as close as he comes to acknowledging the identity of maker and monster—an identity ironically ratified by the pervasive, popular “mis”-naming of the monster as “Frankenstein.”

That Victor clings to the idealized version of his early years, which were in reality structured by lessons in invisibility, is evident in the elaboration of the consequences (one could say symptoms) of those lessons in *Frankenstein*. As a child, Victor declares, his “temper was sometimes violent” and his “vehement” passions “by some law in my temperature . . . were turned, not to childish pursuits, but to an eager desire to learn, and not to learn all things indiscriminately. . . . It was the secrets of heaven and earth that I desired to learn” (43). This thirst for knowledge reveals a premature instrumentality modeled on his father’s, a “temperature” forced by a rigid “law” to forego the playing that, Winnicott holds, constitutes a precondition for authentic living.<sup>11</sup> The consequent feeling of unreality marks his jailhouse breakdown, but, in less acute form, it pervades his experience in general. Victor experiences the self he presents to others as largely fraudulent; his real need for the world to meet him half way, and his rage at its duty-bound refusal to do so, remains hidden and inexpressible, and is ultimately disowned by being projected into the monster.

Indeed, much of Victor’s story seems to foreshadow Winnicott’s “Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self” (1960). Contrast Victor’s infantile lessons in self-control with Winnicott’s description of the conditions that allow the “true self” to develop:

Periodically the infant’s gesture gives expression to a spontaneous impulse; the source of the gesture is the True Self, and the gesture indicates the existence of a potential True Self. We need to examine the way the mother meets this infantile omnipotence revealed in a

gesture. . . . The good enough mother meets the omnipotence of the infant and to some extent makes sense of it. She does this repeatedly. A True Self begins to have life, through the strength given to the infant's weak ego by the mother's implementation of the infant's omnipotent expressions. (1960, 145)

The "false self," conversely, emerges from just the sort of "compliance" demanded by Victor's early (and later) lessons: "The mother who is not good enough . . . repeatedly fails to meet the infant gesture; instead she substitutes her own gesture which is to be given sense by the compliance of the infant. This compliance is the earliest stage of the False Self." Eventually, Winnicott continues, in the most extreme instances, "the False Self sets up as real and it is this that observers tend to think is the real person," especially since its "function is to hide and protect the True Self" (142).

One especially notable moment in this regard occurs when Alphonse strives to talk Victor out of his melancholy, appealing (as always) to his "duty" to "refrain from . . . an appearance of immoderate grief," and Victor despairs about any acknowledgement of his true "gesture": "Now I could only . . . endeavor to hide myself from his view" (Shelley 1831, 83). Indeed, throughout his history Victor is deeply invested in hiding, whether during his long physical "confinement" (55) in his workroom (which parallels the monster's confinement in his sealed-off room), or in his keeping the monster's existence concealed (sometimes even from himself), or in his response to his imminent wedding to Elizabeth, when the functioning of the false self seems most explicit: "As the period fixed for our marriage grew near . . . I felt my heart sink within me. But I concealed my feelings by an appearance of hilarity. . . . Preparations were made for the event; congratulatory visits were received; and all wore a smiling appearance. I shut up, as well as I could, in my own heart the anxiety that preyed there, and entered with seeming earnestness into the plans of my father" (160–61).<sup>12</sup>

Victor's concealing his extreme "anxiety" under an "appearance of hilarity" also conforms to what Melanie Klein

(1935) calls the “manic defense” against the depressive position.<sup>13</sup> Klein stresses that such anxiety pertains above all to one’s own destructiveness. But beyond Kleinian guilt or Winnicottian falseness, the most pervasive consequence of Victor’s early lessons is his despair about the possibility of meaning. Especially after the killing starts, he suffers the failure of external representations to seem connected to his internal states, that is, from a failure of the potential space that would make existence seem meaningful. Since this is a failure of language, melancholia is by definition a condition, as Victor insists, “such as no language can describe,” though this doesn’t keep him from trying: “The blood flowed freely in my veins, but a weight of despair and remorse pressed on my heart, which nothing could remove” (Shelley 1831, 83), he tells us, and elaborates: “Not the tenderness of friendship, nor the beauty of earth, nor of heaven, could redeem my soul from woe: the very accents of love were ineffectual. I was encompassed by a cloud which no beneficial influence could penetrate” (86).

Victor tries to respond to such depression in the manner of Wordsworth. Like Wordsworth, he seeks a restoration of meaning in the evocative landscape of his youth, wandering through the Alps as a way of dealing with his dejection after the deaths of William and Justine: “A tingling long-lost sense of pleasure often came across me during this journey. Some turn in the road, some new object suddenly perceived and recognized, reminded me of days gone by, and were associated with the light-hearted gaiety of boyhood. The very winds whispered in soothing accents, and maternal nature bade me weep no more” (87). But such relief is momentary: “the kindly influence ceased to act—I found myself fettered again to grief, indulging in all the misery of reflection.”

Why can’t Victor, finally, follow Wordsworth? The crucial difference involves Wordsworth’s own early lessons. His capacity (at least as he poses it in his poetry), during depressed periods, to conjure what in “Tintern Abbey” (1798) he calls the emotionally and spiritually nourishing “beauteous forms” (l. 23) of a remembered landscape reflects his earliest experience of the external world.<sup>14</sup> This is the case, for instance, in the “Intimations Ode” (1807), where what finally restores the poet

to meaning is what remains in the “embers” of the self, the infantile “obstinate questionings / Of sense and outward things” (ll. 129, 141–42). Wordsworth’s creative self-assertion is here enabled by the “outward” world’s willingness to *be* questioned; being is shaped not by lessons of self-control, but by “primal sympathy” (l. 181). This is true, too, in the second part of the two-part *Prelude* (1799), where, as Peter Rudnytsky elaborates, “Winnicott’s vision of the mother-child bond finds consummate expression in Wordsworth’s meditation on the ‘infant Babe’” (1991, 80), and where the experience of that “infant Babe” seems even more starkly at odds with Victor’s:

Blessed the infant babe—  
 For with my best conjectures I would trace  
 The progress of our being—blest the babe  
 Nursed in his mother’s arms, the babe who sleeps  
 Upon his mother’s breast, who when his soul  
 Claims manifest kindred with an earthly soul  
 Doth gather passion from his Mother’s eye.  
 . . . . .  
 From this beloved presence—there exists  
 A virtue which irradiates and exalts  
 All objects through all intercourse of sense.  
 No outcast he, bewildered and depressed:  
 Along his infant veins are interfused  
 The gravitation and the filial bond  
 Of Nature that connect him with the world.  
 . . . . .  
     From early days,  
 Beginning not long after that first time  
 In which, a babe, by intercourse of touch  
 I held mute dialogues with my mother’s heart,  
 I have endeavored to display the means  
 Whereby this infant sensibility,  
 Great birthright of our being, was in me  
 Augmented and sustained. (ll. 267–73, 288–94, 310–17)

Among the many ways this infancy contrasts with Victor’s, perhaps the most salient concerns the quality of parental looking. A far cry from Alphonse’s alienating “cursory glance,”

the “Mother’s eye” bestows upon Wordsworth’s babe a “passion” that ultimately “connect[s] him with the world.”<sup>15</sup> When the poet is later afflicted by inevitable, depressing losses, such connections make possible the recovery of meaning:

For now a trouble came into my mind  
From obscure causes. I was left alone  
Seeking this visible world, nor knowing why:  
The props of my affection were removed  
And yet the building stood as if sustained  
By its own spirit. (ll. 321–26)

In contrast to the poet who “by intercourse of touch / . . . held mute dialogues with my mother’s heart,” Victor as a baby is forced into the rigid terms of his parents’ rationalized world, leaving him with no internal “props,” so that in times of trouble his emotional house falls down. There is no “beloved presence” that “irradiates and exalts / All objects”—nothing to underwrite the sort of restorative looking at the world that would bespeak his having once been sympathetically seen. Victor might long for a Wordsworthian recourse to nature, but his early lessons in invisibility doom him to failure.<sup>16</sup>

Victor cannot reconstruct the house of the self, cannot recover the possibility of meaning, and eventually any inclination to do so is eclipsed by his obsession with killing the monster. It isn’t until his deathbed that, “examining [his] past conduct” (Shelley 1831, 180), he tries to re-compose meaning—and the meaning he does arrive at is perhaps the most chilling consequence of all his early lessons. When it comes to understanding his relationship to his monster-child, Victor has become his father. Earlier, anticipating the birth of the new creatures he intends to create, he imagines them as *emotional* beings: they will be “happy,” feel intense “gratitude,” and lovingly “bless” him (55). But, by the end, Victor reconfigures the monster in terms that abolish his inner world. Although the monster has told Victor about his intense—essentially infantile—longing and frustration, and has pleaded only for a mate, Victor defines him here as a “rational creature” from the moment of his creation. In his final construction of the story of



maker and monster, Victor resorts utterly to the terms of Alphonse, according to whom relationships can be calculated, enthusiasm is dismissed as “madness,” and love, like everything else, is a derivative of “duty”: “In a fit of enthusiastic madness I created a rational creature, and was bound toward him, to assure, as far as was in my power, his happiness and well-being. That was my duty; but there was another still paramount to that. My duties towards the beings of my own species had greater claims to my attention, because they included a greater proportion of happiness or misery” (180). In his revisionist account of the monster’s history, Victor elides the main point, the monster’s poignantly frustrated longing to be seen: “He showed unparalleled malignity and selfishness, in evil: he destroyed my friends; he devoted to destruction beings who possessed exquisite sensations” (180). Despite all he has heard, Victor presents the monster finally as incapable of the same “exquisite sensations” as members of his own species.

Just as Alphonse, from the first, misreads Victor, Victor initially misreads his creature by, for example, seeing his new creation’s outstretched hand as seeking not to embrace but to “detain” him (58); and, at the end of the novel, he codifies that misreading by adopting his father’s terms. The new-made “eyes . . . were fixed” on his maker, but just as Victor doesn’t return that first look, his last words render the monster’s invisibility complete. The final glance isn’t even cursory.

Again, the monster’s complete invisibility at the close suggests the degree to which Victor’s own inner world remains unspeakable. I have posed this dilemma as a consequence of Victor’s early lessons, but what is at stake in the monster’s experience of not being seen (and hence, implicitly, also in Victor’s struggles) can be understood in terms of what W. R. Bion calls “containment.” For Bion, an infant’s overwhelmingly intense internal states, especially those of anxiety, fear, and rage, need to be made tolerable by the primary caretaker’s taking them in and returning them in a more bearable form. This process, by helping to establish a distinction and relationship between inside and outside, forms the basis for constructing a self that can experience and think about difficult emotions without being dissolved into them. Containment,

that is, gives rise to the possibility of meaning. “An understanding mother,” Bion writes, “is able to experience the feeling of dread that [a] baby [is] striving to deal with by projective identification, and yet retain a balanced outlook” (1959, 104). So-called “normal development follows” if

the relationship between the infant and the breast permits the infant to project a feeling, say, that it is dying into the mother and to reintroject it after its sojourn in the breast has made it tolerable to the infant psyche. If projection is not accepted by the mother the infant feels that its feeling that it is dying is stripped of such meaning as it has. It therefore reintrojects, not a fear of dying made tolerable, but a nameless dread. (1962, 116).

Although containment first occurs preverbally, eventually it becomes a matter of language. Bion writes of a patient who was “trying to ‘contain’ his emotions within a form of words. . . . The words that should have represented the meaning the man wanted to express were fragmented by the emotional forces to which he wished to give only verbal expression: the verbal formulation could not ‘contain’ his emotions” (1970, 94).

If, as I have argued, the monster can be understood as Victor’s infantile self, Shelley constructs the failure to be seen as a failure of containment, and she elaborates the consequent “nameless dread.” Victor consistently links the dissolution of the self—when it is overwhelmed by its intensities, rather than metabolizing them—with its unspeakability. After Justine’s death, he is “*seized* by remorse and the sense of guilt, which hurried [him] away to a hell of intense tortures, *such as no language can describe*” (Shelley 1831, 83; italics added). In a doomed attempt to enlist the law against the monster after Elizabeth’s death, he tells the magistrate, “My revenge . . . is the *devouring and only passion* of my soul. My rage is *unspeakable*” (167; italics added). The magistrate, Victor recounts, “endeavored to sooth me as a nurse does a child” (168), but this scene of potential containment proves catastrophic; rather than taking in or even seeing Victor’s anxiety, the magistrate, like Alphonse, dismisses it as “madness” and “the effects of de-

lirium.” Thus, the magistrate’s failure “to soothe me as a nurse does a child” replicates the primal origins of Victor’s rage, and he decries being once again rendered invisible: “Man, . . . how ignorant art thou in thy pride of wisdom! Cease; you know not what it is you say”—a protest that reflects his initial unhousing, as he “broke from the [magistrate’s] house angry and disturbed” (168).

Just as Victor finds that “all voluntary thought was swallowed up and lost” so that he is “hurried away by fury” (168), so too in the final pages of the novel the monster tells us he is “torn by the bitterest remorse” (185), and has become “the slave, not the master, of an impulse, which I detested” (182). And just as the monster has become his “uncontrollable passion,” he is defined by his invisibility and unspeakability. As Walton’s initial response reminds us, the creature is “a form which I cannot find words to describe. . . . I shut my eyes involuntarily” (181). As such, he is a split-off representative of the “nameless dread” that marks the failure of containment.

Even before he is rejected by the De Laceys, the monster’s intense feelings go uncontained: “When I first sought [sympathy], it was the . . . feeling of happiness and affection with which my whole being overflowed” (183). The prospect of their sympathy, though, offers a shape for the superabundant self; mere hope sustains the possibility of meaning. But when the De Laceys finally scorn him, the “hell within” (118) breaks loose, and he is “borne away by the stream” of “revenge and hatred” (119) as “a kind of insanity in [his] spirits . . . burst all bounds of reason and reflection” (120). The monster’s world is thus, in Bion’s phrase, “stripped of . . . meaning,” and though he is free to wander anywhere and wants to flee the scene of his devastating disappointment, “every country must be equally horrible.” All places are rendered indistinguishable, flooded as he is by the intensity of his rage.

Under optimal conditions, as Hanna Segal explains, the infant introjects “an anxiety modified by having been contained,” but also “introjects an object capable of containing . . . anxiety” (1975, 135). Insofar as containment depends on sympathetic looking, we can read the presence of such an internalized object as what allows Wordsworth to survive the loss of the “props of [his] affection”: “the building” of the self

“stood as if sustained / By its own spirit,” and he can then experience nature as restorative. Without such an internalized, containing object, as we have seen, Victor cannot experience nature in the way that Wordsworth does. And it is just such an internalized object—or, more precisely, a set of internalized *relationships*—that the monster tries to locate when his own props are lost. When he is deserted by the De Lacey, he is first despondent (“in a state of utter and stupid despair” [Shelley 1831, 119]), then confronted with a rage (“revenge and hatred filled my bosom”) that he struggles to contain by evoking an internalized responsive presence: “When I thought of my friends, of the mild voice of De Lacey, the gentle eyes of Agatha, and the exquisite beauty of the Arabian, these thoughts vanished, and a gush of tears somewhat soothed me” (119). Given his invisibility, of course, this attempt—like Victor’s endeavor to respond to the “soothing accents” of “maternal nature” in his journey through the Alps—is doomed to fail.

Importantly, the monster’s returned rage is turned toward the De Lacey’s now-empty cottage. The house is a figure for containment, defining an inside and an outside, and it thus represents the possibility of mental stability. But when the monster’s “props of affection” are removed, this house of the self falls down—or rather, the monster *burns* it down. This incendiary act defines the moment in which containment fails, as Walton’s summary in the last scene suggests: “Wretch! . . . You throw a torch into a pile of buildings; and, when they are consumed, you sit among the ruins, and lament the fall” (183).

If the monster’s dilemma illustrates Victor’s hidden inner world, Victor’s final identification with the terms of his father’s world implies a complementary dilemma. Which is worse, the novel seems to wonder, a self shattered by its own intensities or one suffocated by the rigid terms imposed upon it? The monster’s nameless dread, or the dreadfulness of being named as Victor is named? It is tempting to read Walton as having access to a potential space between these extremes, to a language both internal and communal. He is “led by the sympathy” Victor evinces “to use the language of [his] heart, to give utterance to the burning ardor of [his] soul” (35), but he also “felt the greatest eagerness to hear [Victor’s] promised narrative” (37). And it is tempting to see *Frankenstein* itself as

Shelley's attempt not only to parse the conditions that construct these dreadful extremes, but also to write her way between them.

But whatever intermediate realm the novel manages to evoke, its deepest investment is in elaborating the quandary itself. Nameless dread or the dread of being named? In *Frankenstein*, this is less a choice than a double bind. Victor dies pledging loyalty to the paternal world that rendered him unseen and uncontained, concluding that he "created a rational creature," while the unhousable monster is "lost in darkness" (185), beyond the reach of even a cursory glance.

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### Notes

1. Johanna M. Smith does question Victor's claim about his good childhood; but, as she sees it, the problem is that "Alphonse does contribute to Victor's ruin . . . because he is a good father" (1992, 278). She usefully evokes John Dussinger's observation that Victor's family is "a paradigm of the social contract based on economic terms" (1976, 52) where affection is subsumed by obligation, but she contrasts the care Victor receives with the monster's abandonment: "while the monster becomes monstrous in part because he has been denied parental care, Victor becomes monstrous in part because he has been *given* care and made subject to the attendant obligations" (Smith 1992, 280; italics in original). My argument is that neither the one nor the other is genuinely cared for: the monster *is* Victor.
2. Given the well-known facts of Mary Shelley's life—the death of her mother Mary Wollstonecraft shortly after childbirth, the emotional unavailability of her father William Godwin, and the way that the writings of both parents reflect the Enlightenment thinking personified by Alphonse—one might be tempted to wonder: if the monster's story is Victor's story, is Victor's story also Mary Shelley's? To pursue that question would require another essay, and it would require our relying on the various kinds of texts by which we know Shelley's life as adequate representations of her for that purpose, a highly debatable assumption. Indeed, I am inclined to think that it is hard enough to speak with confidence about the inner worlds even of people we know well (or ourselves), much less about historical figures. Literary characters are another matter. Since they have no inner world except ones we can imagine from the texts that constitute them, we can't be right or wrong in our speculations. We can only discuss whether—or to what extent—a particular construction seems to accord with the literary evidence.
3. Broadly speaking, Freudian and Lacanian readings assume a fixed view of human nature. For Freud, this is attributed to the inescapable nature of the drives, while for Lacan it is due to the symbolic order. Object relations approaches see both our internal and external worlds as more malleable and potentially more responsive to one another. See Flax 1990, chs. 3 and 4.
4. My object relations reading dovetails with Jeffrey Berman's (1990) approach to *Frankenstein*, which is grounded in the theories of narcissism articulated by Otto

Kernberg and Heinz Kohut. Unlike critics who take Victor's characterization of his childhood at face value, Berman recognizes that it entails "a massive falsification of reality. . . . Victor sentimentalizes his childhood in order to deny past disappointments" (65). But Berman's emphasis falls less on the dynamics of Victor's early experience than on his "pathological narcissism" as an adult. "The real monster in *Frankenstein*," he begins, "is the scientist whose monstrous empathetic failure comes back to haunt him" (56). Thus, though Berman does see in the novel "the disastrous consequences of not good enough parenting" (55), his primary concern is with Victor as the perpetrator rather than as the sufferer from the consequences of such parenting.

5. I elaborate W. R. Bion's notion of "containment" later in the essay.
6. Winnicott writes: "The mother, at the beginning, by an almost 100 percent adaptation affords the infant the opportunity for the illusion that her breast is part of the infant. . . . The same can be said in terms of infant care in general. . . . Omnipotence is nearly a fact of existence. The mother's eventual task is gradually to disillusion the infant, but she has no hope of success unless at first she has been able to give sufficient opportunity for illusion" (1953, 11). He adds that a "good-enough mother meets the omnipotence of the infant and to some extent makes sense of it . . . by [her] implementation of the infant's omnipotent expressions" (1960, 145).
7. Dean Franco's Lacanian reading, which also assumes an oedipal paradigm, likewise does not see Alphonse as unduly authoritarian; indeed, he sees him as not authoritarian enough (1998, 95).
8. In articulating his conception of the mirror-role of the mother, Winnicott acknowledges that Lacan's "'Le Stade du Miroir' (1949) has certainly influenced me"; but he adds—with characteristic understatement—that "Lacan does not think of the mirror in terms of the mother's face in the way that I wish to do here" (1967b, 111). Winnicott stresses the variability of the mother's responsiveness, while for Lacan the mirror is inanimate and therefore unchanging.
9. In trying to express his unseen self to his father, Victor—who elsewhere disavows his creation—here for once openly acknowledges his identity with the monster.
10. In "The Use of an Object" (1969), Winnicott suggests that the world becomes external for the infant only if the parent remains psychically available in the face of the infant's fantasied attacks. Hovering behind Winnicott's view is Klein's description of the destructiveness that pervades the earliest months of life.
11. Playing, for Winnicott, partakes both of the child's inner world and of external reality. Its "precariousness belongs to the fact that it is always on the theoretical line between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived" (1971a, 50). Thus, it is crucial to the child's coming to a sense of the aliveness—and meaningfulness—of the outside world. By being prematurely required to accept externality, Victor is placed in a "false position"; and Winnicott observes that the "protest against being forced into a false existence can be detected from the earliest stages," while its consequences "reappear in serious form at a later stage" (1960, 146).
12. The construction of Victor's false self takes place along lines laid down by Winnicott: "A particular danger arises out of the not infrequent tie-up between the intellectual approach and the False Self. When a False Self becomes organized in an individual who has a high intellectual potential there is a very strong tendency for the mind to become the location of the False Self. . . . The world may observe academic success of a high degree and may find it hard to believe in the very real distress of the individual concerned, who feels 'phoney'" (1960, 144). If the mind is the "location" of such phoniness, we can read Victor's obsession with creating a *body* as a desperate attempt to reconstitute a true self, especially in light of Winnicott's claim that the "True Self comes from the aliveness of the body tissues and the working of body-functions" (148).

Victor's sister is similarly driven to a false position. At Victor's departure for Ingolstadt, "she indeed veiled her grief, and strove to act the comforter to us all. . . . She forgot her own regret in her endeavors to make us forget" (Shelley 1831, 48).

13. Indeed, the first time Victor thinks he is free of the monster he has just created, he suffers what sounds like a manic episode in the clinical sense:

I was unable to contain myself. It was not joy only that possessed me; I felt my flesh tingle with excess of sensitiveness, and my pulse beat rapidly; I was unable to remain for a single instant in the same place; I jumped over the chairs, 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. (Shelley 1831, 61)

This is followed by a long, confining "nervous fever," the first of what one might call Victor's depressions. The depression seems more deeply rooted to me than the mania, though, as I shall argue below, Victor's inability to "contain himself" underlies both these states.

14. All quotations from Wordsworth's poetry are to the edition (1988) of Heaney, with line numbers given parenthetically in the text.
15. As John Turner writes, Wordsworth is able "to lay firm hands on the inner representation of that lost good object that was his own childhood" (1988, 168–69).
16. It is Clerval, of course, who is directly equated with the Wordsworth of "Tintern Abbey" (Shelley 1831, 133). Clerval's father differs significantly from Alphonse; he acknowledges what he cannot understand in his son, and allows him to pursue his inclinations. "His affection for me," relates Clerval, "at length overcame his dislike of learning, and he has permitted me to undertake a voyage of discovery to the land of knowledge" (60).

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