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FRANKENSTEIN, PARADISE LOST, AND “THE MAJESTY OF GOODNESS”

by Tang Soo Ping

“I believed myself destined for some great enterprise I could not rank myself with the herd of common projectors All my speculations and hopes are as nothing, and like the archangel who aspired to omnipotence, I am chained in an eternal hell I trod heaven in my thoughts From my infancy I was imbued with high hopes and a lofty ambition; but how low am I sunk . . . !”¹

Frankenstein’s description of his situation in terms of Satanic overreaching constitutes his claim to tragic grandeur and heroism. The comparison is valid because of the immensity of his initial project, the enormity of his task of tracking down the monster, and the intensity of the psychological drama, all of which convincingly convey the loftiness, daring, and tragedy of an impressive character. Mary Shelley herself attached the subtitle *The Modern Prometheus* to her novel which, notwithstanding the possible ironic undertone, seems to highlight, on one level at least, the stature of the protagonist.

The allusion to the Satanic revolt inevitably calls to mind the event of Adam’s Fall and this link is affirmed in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, a work which plays an authoritative role in the novel. But such references to

Satan and Adam, the traditional archetypes of pride, tend to undermine Frankenstein's proud claim to distinction and exclusiveness. Indeed, the novel's ultimate focus on the fall of man creates a mythological frame of reference that relates the personal situation to a larger perception of man, his nature, and destiny. As a result, Frankenstein as a distinguished character becomes eclipsed; his heroic individualism pales in the broader perspective of human history and myth.

Essentially, Frankenstein's claim to tragic grandeur is questioned and mocked by means of the twin theme of forbidden knowledge and love. From this, a new concept of heroism emerges.

In Chapter 15 of the novel, the monster recounts to Frankenstein his reading of three books that he found in the wood near the De Lacey cottage. These are *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch's *Lives*, and *The Sorrows of Werther*. All three provide much delight and education, but *Paradise Lost* excites "different and far deeper emotions" (396) than the other two works. The significance of Milton's poem lies in its stirring image of Adam's Edenic life. Man is seen to be "happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator" (396). The monster's attraction to the condition of simple joy and kinship also explains his attachment to the De Lacey family.² His childlike wonder at and delight in the happy Edenic state not only convey his earnest yearning for a better life for himself; they suggest a simple piety that stems from a keen sense of divine love and care. This is borne out by his description of his mood:

" . . . I allowed my thoughts, unchecked by reason, to ramble in the fields of Paradise, and dared to fancy amiable and lovely creatures sympathizing with my feelings and cheering my gloom; their angelic countenances breathed smiles of consolation . . . " (398)

This preoccupation with Paradise takes us back to the beginning of life, to the ambience of the Prime Mover and Creator, God of the Book of Genesis. In re-establishing the idea of the close bond between God and man, the monster points to the sacredness of the Edenic life, for love and kinship are the source of joy, and of life itself. Frankenstein's creation of the monster violates the Edenic code of love. It marks his rejection of man, his denial of his bond with natural humanity. His guilt doubles when he abandons the creature he creates.

Frankenstein explains that he is repelled by the monster's revolting appearance, but his behavior is more closely connected with his attitude of self-aggrandizement. At the prospect of creating a new race of beings he remarks: "No father could claim the gratitude of his child so

completely as I should deserve theirs” (314). He would like to think of himself as God-like, a begetter of a whole species of beings; but he feels no inclination to love and protect what he creates, especially when his creation proves grotesque.

The constant love and concern shown by Frankenstein’s own father, despite the thoughtlessness of his errant son, are fitting reminders of the relationship that derives from that original bond established in Eden. Indeed, the strong ties of affection and devotion that bind his family, and that extend to the two orphan girls, Elizabeth and Justine Moritz, tellingly recall the Edenic condition. Such generosity of feeling denounces the scientist’s “gloomy and narrow reflections upon self” (297).

The book shows that the determined pursuit of knowledge marks a disregard for man’s natural state as originally created. Frankenstein’s fall is not a mere matter of a trespass into forbidden knowledge, and never owning up to the fact that he has encroached on prohibited grounds, as when he talks of himself as being “guiltless” (431) and not “blameable” (490). His greater fault lies in his incomprehension of the nature of his guilt.

The monster’s ugliness belies a loving and kindly disposition. In terms of feeling, he is as “beautiful and alluring” (397) as the Adam he reads about in *Paradise Lost*. For the monster, the state of utter solitude and exclusion from human affection constitutes a private hell that contradicts the Edenic image which so holds his thoughts. With Frankenstein’s refusal to provide him with a companion of his own, Paradise seems well and truly lost. Yet even his relentless killing of innocent victims never really obscures his Edenic qualities of loving and caring. His “grief and horror” (492) at the death of Frankenstein are proof of the tenderness that he still bears towards his maker. He dies for the very reason that he is still “the prey of feelings unsatisfied, yet unquenched” (496). Paradise for such a creature is never really abandoned. He carries it within him in his persistent dream of love and kinship.

Frankenstein is the more desolate figure. On recounting their first meeting somewhere in the North Pole, amidst ice and cold, Walton describes the proud aloofness of the scientist. He was a forlorn castaway who refused to be rescued until he was assured of being taken in the direction he needed to go to continue his quest. In this first view of Frankenstein, the frozen emaciated condition of the man and the inhospitable landscape reflect his utter poverty, as much as they also warn of Walton’s own prospective impoverishment. Whereas woods and

fields, sunshine and showers, spring and birdsong are the monster's natural setting, prisons, dungeons and a desolate island of "barren rock" (439) characterize Frankenstein's spiritual landscape. Night is his proper medium.

When Frankenstein calls himself "a restless spectre" (439) and "the shadow of a human being . . . a mere skeleton" (454), he may be thinking of his state of being oppressed and persecuted. However, the images more appropriately describe his self-chosen exclusion from natural feelings and relations—his condition of reduced humanity. The monster's ugliness thus symbolizes his creator's own monstrosity and aberration.

As his instinctive though quickly suppressed sympathy for the monster suggests, Frankenstein has an innate capacity for feeling that could enrich his life. The monster, indeed, is his double in the sense that his affectionate nature is a reflection of the scientist's Edenic aspect. However, the fact that Frankenstein continues to reject the creature signals the compulsive banishment of the inner-feeling self.

Frankenstein's pretension to Godliness is complemented by his subsequent roles as martyr and crusader. Contrasted with the monster's simplicity, openness and frank intensity, the scientist's posturing accentuates his falseness and corruption. His role as martyr is evident when, after Justine's execution for a crime she did not commit, his grief is accompanied by the feeling that his is still the harsher sentence. The dead Justine, he feels, is at peace, while he is still trapped in "a hell of intense tortures" (353). But it is the identification of his situation with that of Satan that proves the extent of his self-pity and egoism. As crusader, Frankenstein is ready to battle against evil. His refusal to provide a female companion for the monster at the risk of having to face the latter's fury is an honorable feat for the good of mankind; he is "no coward to bend beneath words" (438). The meeting with the creature on the night of his (Frankenstein's) wedding is to be a battle to the death. When Elizabeth is killed, he proudly announces a campaign of vengeance which he describes in terms of martyrdom, "devotion," and "heroism" (472). It is with this same sense of noble purpose that he exhorts Walton's crew to persist with fortitude and courage in their "glorious expedition" (487) despite and even because of the immense dangers confronting them.

Falseness is not confined to Frankenstein alone. It is a common trait that eventually damages the apparent virtue of the most sensitive and

caring. The De Laceys' loving and tender nature shows an ugly side at the approach of the monster. Their violent rejection of a being that looks revoltingly different points to the basic feebleness and treacherousness of human feeling. Eye images assert the tendency to judge and feel according to appearances, and testify to the superficiality of human sympathy. References to blindness also suggest incomprehension of this adulteration of natural feeling.

Frankenstein's vanity is shared by Walton. Their relationship suggests man's frequent reaching out after fantasies and worldly dreams and the withdrawal from the inner Edenic self. As suggested by the monster, this is "God warring with his creatures" (396); it is a war that man wages with himself, between his Godlike nature and his pride.

As Frankenstein asserts, his career duplicates that of Satan; it also reenacts the folly of Adam. The larger, traditional significance of his role may seem to raise his stature as a character, but only at the expense of an individuality which is so necessary to his sense of personal distinction. Even if his failure is not made exactly commonplace, it is not unexpected and, seen in relation to the fall of man, is to be regarded not so much as a tragedy but as a fitting end to human pride. Against the symbol of a loving Creator, truly noble and gracious, the proud ambition of Satan and Adam only serves to establish their vanity and false splendour. Frankenstein's identification with these betrays the hollowness of his claim to grandeur and heroism.

The monster dies for love. Through his death, he brings to Walton the promise of redemption. His grief, torment and love which lead to his suicide move the would-be explorer to a depth of sympathy and sorrow that he has not felt before. Walton's anxiety for his crew and understanding of his men's fears have already shown him to be more feeling than Frankenstein. His encounter with the monster may save him from a fate similar to that of the scientist whom he so admires.

The loss of Paradise, seen in terms of pride and the inability to love, is the theme of the novel, and the narrative structure is remarkably suited to the task of affirming and developing it. The method of mediated narration is a familiar device for distancing strange and extraordinary events. With the suggested similarity between Walton's and Frankenstein's hopes and dreams, the enframing of narrative within narrative (each told in the first person) focuses on the isolation of each narrator. While this stresses the deliberate inward-looking attitude of Walton and Frankenstein, it also enhances the monster's futile reaching out in love

and kinship to his creator and to the people whom he meets. These narrative frames also isolate Frankenstein from the creature, his inner self. Significantly too, the individual narrative frames serve to accentuate the scientist's stance of grand exclusiveness. Balanced against the monster's yearning and supplicating attitude, his remoteness demonstrates his proud independence. Finally, the two frames, enclosed within Walton's narrative, point to the first narrator's own divided personality, one representing his self-isolating ambition, and the other depicting his still persistent feelings of love and relationship. The epistolary device is the final touch that encapsulates his isolation and the artificial relation that, for him, has taken the place of natural human ties.

Against the popular Romantic view of Frankenstein's Promethean role, the theme of failure and loss identifies the moral ambiguity and complexity that challenge the reader's response to the character. It has been said that such moral ambivalence also reflects Mary Shelley's attitude towards her father, William Godwin, and her husband, the poet Shelley. Close as she was to both, and susceptible as she was to their influence, she was also inclined to criticize their sociopolitical thought (in the case of Godwin) and poetic aspirations (in the case of Shelley).³ *Frankenstein* poses a subtle warning against excessive liberalism and individualism. Mary Shelley's greater achievement, however, lies in the fact that she brought a new dimension to the Gothic novel. Terror was turned inside out as it were, and looked at anew.

NOTES

¹Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, Three Gothic Novels*, ed. Peter Fairclough (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968) 484. All subsequent quotations from the novel are taken from this edition.

²William A. Walling observes that "at the heart of *Frankenstein* is a persistent, undeniably moving cry for fellowship" Walling also comments on the author's interest in *Paradise Lost* at the time she wrote *Frankenstein*; this, apparently, was linked to the inclination of the age to re-evaluate the poem and its portrayal of divine benevolence and Satan's role. See Walling's book entitled *Mary Shelley* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1972) 40, 48.

³Robert Kiely says of Mary Shelley's novel: "*Frankenstein* is neither a pure hymn of praise to Godwin and Shelley nor a simple repudiation of them Her reservations about them were deep, complex, and mixed with genuine admiration." See *The Romantic Novel in England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1972) 164.