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“The Filthy Mass” : Victim of Frankenstein’s Transgression

Shinichi Hagiwara

I

In *Frankenstein*⁽¹⁾ replete with astonishments, Frankenstein’s behaviour shortly after creation is one of the most astonishing: the creator’s flight from his Creature. When the Creature’s “waterly eyes” (38) open, the creator is terrified and runs away from his creation: “breathless horror and disgust filled my heart” (39). Frankenstein forms a monster so hideous that even the creator turns away from it in disgust.

Frankenstein’s first intention was to attempt “the creation of a being like myself” (35) with “beautiful” (38) features. Finding that “the minuteness of the parts” (35) slowed him down, he resolved, contrary to his first intention, to make the giant “about eight feet in height, and proportionably large” (35). As he worked on, he arrogantly allowed himself to believe that he, alone and unaided, could “pour a torrent of light into our dark world” (35), and to boast that “a new species would bless me as its creator and source” (35). Yet he knew he had forged the monster in what he calls a “workshop of filthy creation” (36).

Why does Frankenstein specifically say that it is only when the monster becomes animated that he abruptly discovers its loathsomeness? We cannot help wondering that he seems not to have been fully aware of the monster’s hideousness in the process of making

it. Here Frankenstein's statement clearly contradicts that of his "journal of the four months that preceded my creation" (109), in which "the minutest description of my odious and loathsome person is given" (109). Now that no adequate account of the contradiction is provided in the text, there is no clue to explain it. In any case it suffices to say that Frankenstein abhors his Creature, is horrified, and flees his responsibilities at a critical moment.

Recently a number of critics have noticed the novel's femaleness and its significance in connection with Mary Shelley's own experience of "awakening sexuality"⁽²⁾ at the time she wrote the novel. Ellen Moers is one of the earliest critics to point out the psychological association of Frankenstein's strange turn away from his Creature following creation with the author's maternal childbearing and postpartum depression :

Mary Shelley's book [becomes] most interesting, most powerful, and most feminine: in the motif of revulsion against new born life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences.⁽³⁾

If we recall the details of Mary Shelley's own "birth and its consequences," we might be tempted to assume that Frankenstein's confusion and perplexity take on resonance as a symbol of the author's anxieties about femaleness.

Mary Shelley (1792-1851), until a widow at twenty-five, underwent five pregnancies and was intermittently unwell in eight years' company with Percy Shelley (1792-1822).⁽⁴⁾ On 22 February 1815 she gave birth prematurely to a baby called Clara, who, to her distress, died on 6 March : interesting is the entry in her journal of 19 March

1815, in which she writes, “Dreamed that my little baby came to life again, that it had only been cold, and that we rubbed it before the fire, and it lived. Awake and find no baby.”⁽⁵⁾ In January of 1816 in which *Frankenstein* was begun, she gave birth to her son William, who died of malaria in Rome on 7 June 1819. On 1 September 1817 she gave birth to a daughter Clara Everina, who died of a fever exacerbated by the rushed journey across Italy on 24 September 1818. Percy Florence, the only one of the Shelleys’ children to survive, was born on 12 November 1819. On 16 June 1822 she miscarried during her fifth pregnancy, and her husband saved her from bleeding to death by putting her in an ice bath. On 8 July of the same year Percy Shelley set sail in a storm and was found drowned ten days later.

In a sense, then, given the history of Mary Shelley’s disastrous pregnancies in which Moers’ reading is set, it seems persuasive in its own way, but *Frankenstein*’s queer flight still remains unsolved even by it. For Moers throws no light on the novel’s most prominent feature: that the Creature is not a child of woman but the creation of a man.

II

The Creature *Frankenstein* produces without the assistance of a female has an unnatural genesis. What should not be overlooked here, however, is that the Creature’s ingredients are one hundred percent natural even if he is unnatural by the process of his creation. He springs not from a natural sexual relation of a man and a woman but is unnaturally forged in the “workshop of filthy creation.” *Frankenstein*’s “filthy creation” of life is thoroughly grounded in a unified natural philosophy embracing everything from human physiology to galvanic electricity.⁽⁶⁾

The first phase of *Frankenstein*’s undertaking is “to prepare a

frame...with all its intricacies of fibres, muscles, and veins”(35). Motivated by “an almost supernatural enthusiasm”(33), he pursues “nature to her hiding places”(36) to study the “cause of generation and life”(34) and learns that “the tremendous secrets of the human frame”(36) are interlocked secrets of sex and death. He observes “the natural decay and corruption of the human body”(33). He collects and arranges materials furnished by “the dissecting room and the slaughterhouse” as well as the “charnel houses”(36). Thus his laborious work to fabricate the collage of human body parts is brought near to a conclusion.

At last Frankenstein actually animates “the lifeless thing”(38) by casting the “spark of being”(38) into it. Though the “spark of being” is never explicitly defined as electrical in nature, his retrospective narrative of his life suggests that electricity guided the scientist to his discovery of life’s secret; “a man of great research in natural philosophy”⁽⁷⁾ explained the laws of electricity when Frankenstein, at the age of fifteen, witnessed the destruction of an “old and beautiful oak”(23) by a sudden bolt of lightning. So profound was the effect of this experience that he said, “Destiny was too potent, and her immutable laws had decreed my utter and terrible destruction.”⁽⁸⁾

To appreciate fully the exact formula for creating life that underlies Frankenstein’s endeavours, however, we must remember that in the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* Mary Shelley supplies us with some hints about the role of galvanism. Describing the genesis of *Frankenstein*, she writes:

Many and long conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley, to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener. During one of these, various philosophical doctrines were discussed, and among others the nature of the principle of

life, and whether there was any probability of its ever being discovered and communicated. They talked of the experiments of Dr Darwin,...who preserved a piece of vermicelli in a glass case, till by some extraordinary means it began to move with voluntary motion. Not thus, after all, would life be given. Perhaps a corpse would be re-animated ; *galvanism had given token of such things* : perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth [my emphasis] (232-233).

In 1780, while the Bolognese anatomist Luigi Galvani (1737-1798)⁽⁹⁾ was dissecting and studying a frog, he noticed that when lightning flashed across the sky or when his sharp scalpel touched the nerves in the frog's thigh, the thigh twitched. He suspected that there was electricity in the frog's muscles and experimented to explain what he had seen. In 1791 he published his *De Viribus Electricitatis in Motui Musculari* (or *Commentary on the Effects of Electricity on Muscular Motion*), in which he came to the conclusion that a special form of electricity, which he called "animal electricity" but which was subsequently widely known as "galvanism," provided a stimulus which produced contractions or convulsions in the limbs of the dead animals.

Galvani's nephew, Professor Giovanni Aldini (1762-1834)⁽¹⁰⁾ of Bologna University, whose fundamental thesis was derived from his uncle, performed a long series of ghoulish experiments on human, not just animal. He attempted to determine precisely the responsiveness of different corporeal fragments by running a current through the ears and mouths of the dead. He described in detail how he took post at the foot of the scaffold in order to receive the fresh and bloody bodies the

moment the axe descended, because the dead bodies of disease, whose fibres and humours were already destroyed or infected, were useless. And, to our surprise, Aldini went one step further: he nurtured the illusion of bringing the dead to life and galvanized the corpse of an executed murderer at Newgate. Here is indeed the scientific prototype of Frankenstein. It is no wonder that Mary Shelley appears in all probability to have based Frankenstein's attempt to create a human being from dead organic materials through the use of galvanism on the most advanced scientific research of the early nineteenth century.

Frankenstein's hubristic ambition is to attain God's omnipotent power of creation. At the same time he subtly signifies his wish not only to penetrate female womb and show how it works but also actually to steal it.⁽¹¹⁾ The story of Frankenstein is, after all, the story of a man who usurps the female role by physically giving birth to a child. And it can be inferred from this that it is because Frankenstein regards his Creature as the instrument of his most potent desire to usurp the female reproductive power that he relinquishes all the paternal responsibilities.

III

Then, in order to understand what it means to be abandoned by the creator as well as how it feels like to be a "filthy mass" (125), a monster-son born of a man exclusively, we must turn to the Creature's narrative.

Frankenstein consists of three concentric circles of narration: the young explorer Walton as initial and ultimate narrator addresses his letters containing Frankenstein's recital to him and the Creature's speech to Frankenstein to his fictive and faceless sister Margaret Saville. Mary Shelley's strategic arrangement to divide the novel into a series of first-person narratives instead of employing a single

perspective enables her to be relieved from taking a definitive position on her subject. Because of her narrative strategy, she is successful in encouraging us to participate not only in Frankenstein's egocentric view but also in the Creature's bitter self-revelations.⁽¹²⁾

In his narrative, the Creature mentions his encounter with Frankenstein after an interval of two and a half years among the sublime and magnificent Alps. Frankenstein's first reaction to the encounter consists in mere command: "Begone ! relieve me from the sight of your detested form" (81). In spite of this, the Creature responds with the gesture of his hands placed over Frankenstein's eyes and pathetically pleads a hearing: "Thus I relieve thee, my creator...thus I take from thee a sight which you abhor. Still thou canst listen to me, and grant me thy compassion" (81). The Creature knows his only favourable reception by a human being comes not from the visual relationship but from the relationship of language.⁽¹³⁾

Indeed, language is of utmost importance for the Creature's life. After realizing the hopelessness of specular relationship, the Creature retreats into the hovel adjoining the De Lacey's cottage and then learns to speak, read, and write by closely watching them through a peephole of the hovel. His linguistic development is spectacular from the primitive stage to the highest competence. The Creature finally becomes master of the "godlike science" (92) of language. The three texts that he discovers by chance in the forest are noteworthy, since each volume is intended to nurture a particular aspect of the Creature's character: Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* teaches him about love; Plutarch's *Lives* instructs him on the serious history of Western civilization, and Milton's *Paradise Lost* offers him a justification of God's ways to men.

Of course one of the most crucial books referred to in the

Creature's narrative is *Paradise Lost*, which is also indispensable to the reading of *Frankenstein*. First of all, according to S.M.Gilbert and S. Gubar,⁽¹⁴⁾ Mary Shelley originates the Creature's questions about his origin of birth: "Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come?" (107) from Miltonic Adam's query: "who I was, or where, or from what cause,/ [I] Knew not" (*Paradise Lost* 8. 270-271). The Creature, thrown into hopeless confusion and perplexity, appears to be trying to understand his presence and making endless speculations on his identity crisis, with no adequate answers. In this connection, we need to pay attention to the significance of *Frankenstein's* title page, with the Miltonic epigraph:

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
To mould me man? Did I solicit thee
From darkness to promote me?

This clue to the nature of the relationship between "Maker" and Milton's Adam performs an important function in foreshadowing the stories of Frankenstein and his Creature. In a sense, then, even before *Paradise Lost* is compiled as a central item on the Creature's reading list, the novel's literal structure permits us to get a glimpse of the God-Adam Frankenstein-Creature analogy.⁽¹⁵⁾

Another reason for the relevance of *Paradise Lost* to the reading of *Frankenstein* is that Mary Shelley bases her novel on the Miltonic skeleton which centres the continual and complex reallocations of meaning among characters whose histories echo and re-echo each other. Both Frankenstein and his Creature, together with a number of secondary characters, play all the neo-biblical parts over and over again.⁽¹⁶⁾

In fact Frankenstein can be linked to Adam, Satan, and God. In his Edenic childhood, he, like Adam, is “sheltered by the gardener [his benevolent father] , from every rougher wind.”⁽¹⁷⁾ When Eve-like Elizabeth Lavenza joins the family, she seems to be “a being heaven sent, and bearing a celestial stamp in all her features.”⁽¹⁸⁾ During the period of attendance at the university of Ingolstadt, he begins to metamorphose from Adam to Satan, as his ardent desire to discover “the cause of generation and life” gets more feverish. He overreaches the boundaries of man and plays God in the capacity to bestow animation. Frankenstein, echoing Milton’s fallen angel, confesses that “I bore a hell within me, which nothing could extinguish” (68). He finally comes to look on himself as a diabolical creator who loosens a filthy monster into the world in much the same way that Milton’s Satan does.

Like Frankenstein, the Creature alters in turn the roles of Adam, Satan, and even God. The Creature first argues his primordial innocence. The Adam-Creature analogy is developed by Mary Shelley, and Milton’s rendition of Adam’s coming to consciousness in Eden is her model, with the difference that Adam awoke to find gentle God as a mentor while the Creature was exposed to the harsher world. Before long, however, the Creature is transformed into a Satanic figure: he frightens away a shepherd from the hut, which seems to him “as exquisite and divine a retreat as Pandaemonium appeared to the daemons of hell” (85). Later, when the Creature hides in the hovel adjoining the De Lacey’s cottage, his wistful observations of this idealized family through a small chink in the wall arouse Satan’s mingled envy and admiration. Eventually, on being coldheartedly rejected by them, he destroys the cottage and its inhabitants with rage and revenge. Becoming entirely Satanic : “I, like arch-fiend, bore a hell

within me”(115), he vows “eternal hatred and vengeance to all mankind”(120). Simultaneously the Creature requests Frankenstein to make a female companion, an Eve to comfort and embrace him and succeeds in persuading his creator to comply his requisition. But, finding that Frankenstein, disgusted by his enterprise, destroys the female monster, the Creature professes to murder Elizabeth on the wedding-night. Under the dream of founding a new, vegetarian race somewhere in “the vast wilds of South America”(124) lies the Creature’s hidden desire to enact the role of a God.

As the roles of both Frankenstein and his Creature continually reallocate, the meanings of their intertwining relationships grow more and more confusing. At a certain place, the Creature points out to Frankenstein: “I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel”(80), adding elsewhere that “my form is a filthy type of yours... Satan had his companions...but I am solitary and abhorred”(109). But their positions are sometimes reversed, and there is a series of exchanges in which the roles of slave and master are traded between them. At one time Frankenstein acknowledges: “I was the slave of my creature”(132), and at another time the Creature triumphantly commands, “You are my creator, but I am your master ; obey ! ”(145).

As is shown above, Frankenstein is blind to the fact that he has abandoned the Creature of his own hands immediately after creation. It is apparent that he must take responsibility for the act of creation and its consequences, whether the Creature strikes him as aesthetically pleasing or not. But of course he does not. Frankenstein’s characteristic response to the situation is: “I felt as if I had committed some great crime, the consciousness of which haunted me. I was guiltless”(140). He talks as though it had nothing to do with himself.

The Creature’s filial tenderness is in marked contrast to

Frankenstein's rigid hostility. The Creature expresses his unrequited love for Frankenstein and requires the scientist to accomplish "the duties of a creator towards his creature" (82). The Creature also exhibits a fascinating interplay of tones in which serious threats alternate with the most pathetic pleading. Towards the catastrophic end of the novel, Frankenstein and his Creature perform "the movements of a dance of unification in which each one is essential to the symmetry of the dance."⁽¹⁹⁾ And at the denouement, the Creature, after ascertaining Frankenstein's death, promises to seek the northern extremity of the globe, where he will consummate a transcendent union with his creator.

IV

Mary Shelley's narrative strategy in *Frankenstein*, which is, in a sense, a parody of *Paradise Lost*, allows us not only to participate in Frankenstein's egocentric view but also to explore the Creature's philosophical meditation on what it means to be an abandoned child and on how it feels like to be a parentless orphan. Of the three narrations that compose *Frankenstein*, the Creature's agonizing tale to his creator has received the least attention by critics, no doubt because on the surface the author's emphasis appears to be laid on the guilt and alienation of the archetypal mad scientist. Yet the drastic shift in point of view that the Creature's self-revelations represent probably constitutes the author's most inner sympathy for him.

Recent research into biochemistry, such as the discovery of DNA and the genetic engineering, has brought us to the point where human beings are able to perform an artificial manipulation of life forms in ways previously reserved only to nature and chance. In consideration of this situation, the Creature's question to Frankenstein: "How dare you

sport thus with life?" sounds like Mary Shelley's implicit warning against the possible dangers inherent in the technological developments of modern science.

NOTES

- (1) Quotations from the novel are taken from Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (The 1818 Text), ed. Marilyn Butler (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1993).
- (2) Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "Horror's Twin: Mary Shelley's Monstrous Eve," in *Mary Shelly*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1985), p.116.
- (3) Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (Garden City, New Jersey: Doubleday, 1976), p.93.
- (4) Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (1988; rpt. New York & London: Routledge, 1989), Chronology.
- (5) Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert eds., *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814-1844* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 70.
- (6) On Frankenstein's lively concern for natural philosophy, see Crosbie Smith, "Frankenstein and Natural Magic," in *Frankenstein, Creation and Monstrosity*, ed. Stephen Bann (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), pp.39-59.
- (7) Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (The 1831 Text), ed. Maurice Hindle (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p.40. Hereafter cited as *Frankenstein*.
- (8) *Ibid.*, p.41.
- (9) The explanation of Galvani's research in "animal electricity" draws on I. Bernard Cohen, "Introduction," in Luigi Galvani, *Commentary on the Effects of Electricity on Muscular Motion*, trans. M. G. Foley (Norwalk, Connecticut: Burndy Library, 1953), pp.9-41.
- (10) The discussion of Aldini's glouish experiments draws on Barbara Maria Stafford, *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: The MIT Press, 1991), pp.410-411, 459-461.
- (11) Cf. Anne Mellor, *op. cit.*, p.112.
- (12) The discussion of Mary Shelley's narrative strategy in *Frankenstein*

- draws on Mary Poovey, “ ‘My Hideous Progeny’ : The Lady and the Monster,” in *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York : Chelsea House, 1987), pp. 91-93.
- (13) On the Creature’s use of language, see Peter Brook, “‘Godlike Science / Unhallowed Arts’: Language, Nature, and Monstrosity,” in *Mary Shelley*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York : Chelsea House, 1985), pp.101-114.
- (14) Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *op. cit.*, p.128.
- (15) *Ibid.*, p.118.
- (16) *Ibid.*, p.123.
- (17) *Frankenstein*, p.32.
- (18) *Ibid.*, p.34.
- (19) Leonard Wolf ed., *The Essential Frankenstein* (New York : A Plume Book, 1993), p.269.n.