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Perfecting monstrosity: *Frankenstein* and the enlightenment debate on perfectibility

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Mary Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus*, has captivated audiences for two centuries, spawning a sizable industry in critical interpretation, myriad spin offs, and innumerable memes. A key factor sustaining interest in the novel has been the protean nature of its mythological framework and a related series of ambiguities relating to its core message or messages. Like many of the classical and Christian myths, on which the novel draws so heavily, *Frankenstein* has proved amenable to reinterpretation and appropriation in light of changing social concerns and critical fashions. One of the earliest and most venerable interpretations reads the novel as a critique of human hubris, of the scientific (perhaps scientist) dreams of the Enlightenment, and of faith in the possibility of social progress through the acquisition of knowledge and the technical mastery of nature. An early review in the *Edinburgh Magazine* claimed it "might, indeed, be the author's view to shew that the powers of man have been wisely limited, and that misery would follow their extension" ("*Frankenstein*" March 1818, 253). Richard Brinsley Peake's 1823 theatrical adaptation of the text was even titled *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein.* Mary Shelley herself gave fuel to this interpretation when she wrote, in her 1831 Preface to the book: "[f]rightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world" (2003, 9).

According to this theory, *Frankenstein* should be understood as an episode in a wider Romantic critique of the dominant philosophy during the previous century in Europe. More particularly, it is sometimes read as a parable about the monsters unleashed in France and elsewhere through its revolutionary aspirations for social transformation through reason. Candidates for the symbolic identity of the monster have ranged from the Luddites in England (a subject of sympathy and concern for the Shelleys as for Byron) to the emergent working class as a whole (Moretti 2005, 85–88; Smith 2019). What unites these variant readings is a consistent conception of the creature as a horrific by-product of philosophical or technological modernity. Versions of this interpretation continued to provide lively cultural tropes into the later-nineteenth century and beyond. Within most of these interpretations, Victor Frankenstein is the central character in the novel. He figures either as a Faust figure, aspiring after forbidden knowledge, or as Prometheus, attempting to steal the divine fire of the Gods and justly punished. There is also a significant interpretative tradition of seeing Victor Frankenstein as an embodiment of real historical figures closer to home for Mary Shelley. In addition to

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an array of natural philosophers, he has been interpreted as a cipher for her husband, the radical and idealistic poet Percy Shelley, whose revolutionary ardour and penchant for physicometaphysical speculation Mary sought to temper (Lovell 1953, 49; Fleck 1967, 238; Hindle 2003, xxiii). Alternatively, Frankenstein has been read as a vehicle for critical dialogue with Mary Shelley's father, the philosopher and novelist William Godwin, whose utopian vision of the social future, articulated in *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), outlined "an inevitable progress of improvement" towards "universal justice" (vol. 2, 894; Sterrenburg 1979). Some have suggested a possible connection with the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau who, like Frankenstein, was a citizen of Geneva (Clemit 2003, 33). Rousseau's influential 1762 treatise on human education from childhood, *Émile*, certainly provided regular reading material for Mary Shelley, along with his novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and his scandalous *Confessions* (Garrett 2002, 19, 23–24, 55–56). Rousseau's cloudy concept of "*perfectibilité*" had increasingly become a motif in debates about the prospect of social reform in the last decades of the eighteenth century, despite its author's deep personal misgivings about the direction of European history. Specific models aside, Frankenstein is seen widely as a generic stand-in for the myriad optimistic natural and political philosophers of the eighteenth century, whose dreams of human and social transformation had, in the eyes of some, culminated in the horrors that accompanied the French Revolution (Catron and Newman 1993). In this paper I want to suggest a different reading of the relationship between *Frankenstein* and the enthusiasms of the pre- and post-revolutionary eras in Europe. While I do not wish to deny that the Frankenstein character invites readers to engage in critical reflection upon the obsessive pursuit of knowledge for instrumental purposes, an overemphasis on this motif can distort our understanding of major themes of the novel and their relationship to the novel's historical and intellectual contexts.

In what follows, I argue that *Frankenstein* should be understood not as a simple critique of the Enlightenment quest for human improvement, but as a powerful reflection on the modes and mechanisms by which a better humanity might be nurtured and on the obstacles to that project. To put it crudely, I read Mary Shelley's dedication of the novel to William Godwin, "Author of *Political Justice*, *Caleb Williams* &c.", to be a genuine gesture of intellectual and political affiliation, rather than a pointed jibe. I see the novel not as a systematic rejection of the optimism of her parents and husband, but as an extended dialogue with it, one that reveals considerable sympathy for their position and aspirations, albeit with a characteristic inflection of the author's own. The concept of "sympathy" itself is key to this inflection.

I am certainly not the first to argue that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has a primary relationship of affinity with, rather than opposition to, the broader Godwin-Wollstonecraft-Shelley milieu. The relationship seemed quite clear to early reviewers. Sir Walter Scott famously postulated in print that the novel had probably been written by Percy Bysshe Shelley, drawing a polite but pointed epistolary clarification from its author (M. Shelley 1980, vol. 1, 71). Scott also noted a thematic affiliation with Godwin's novel *St Leon* – a connection claimed by a number of early reviewers. The *Edinburgh Magazine* claimed *Frankenstein* was "formed on the Godwinian manner", exhibiting at once "all the faults but many of the beauties of that model" ("*Frankenstein*" March 1818, 249). The Tory *Quarterly Review* suggested the book was "written in the spirit of [Godwin's] School", before going on to attack it for precisely this reason ("*Frankenstein*" January

1818, 382). Among modern scholars to have explored this affiliation in important ways we might include, *inter alia*, Butler (1994), Hetherington (1997), and Clemit (2003). Despite this history of recognition, there remains more to be said about the relationship between *Frankenstein* and the debate on perfectibility in the wake of the French Revolution. The pages that follow situate the novel in relation to a number of aspects of this debate, examining issues that traverse theology, physiology, education, moral theory, and politics. Together, they suggest that *Frankenstein* as a novel should be read not as a pessimistic reflection on the futility of human ambition, but as a pointed reflection on remediable moral failures that might thwart it.

I do not mean to suggest that Frankenstein should be reread as a confident promise of future human bliss. Such a reading of the text would be foolhardy. Nor do I mean to suggest that Mary Shelley shows no difference of intellectual position from her parents or her husband (there were significant differences between the three anyway). Mary Shelley was a major artist in her own right and quite intellectually independent. Moreover, there is considerable evidence to demonstrate that she was critical of aspects of the speculative and political philosophy within her milieu. Certainly, she came to distance herself from utopian and revolutionary radicalism over time. As she wrote in an oft-quoted passage from her journal in 1838:

> Some have a passion for reforming the world; others do not cling to particular opinions. That my parents and Shelley were of the former class, makes me respect it. I respect such when joined to real disinterestedness, toleration and a clear understanding […] But I am not for violent extremes, which duly bring on an injurious reaction […] since I had lost Shelley I have no wish to ally myself to the Radicals – they are full of repulsion to me – violent without any sense of Justice – selfish in the extreme. (Cited in Hatlen 1983, 44–45)

The passage is often used to mark the difference of outlook and sensibility between Mary and her milieu. It is worth noting, however, the implied transition of her sentiments in this passage. "Since I had lost Shelley": that, at the very least, might give us pause in relation to the original purpose and meaning of the text of *Frankenstein*. It is also worth noting that, even as late as 1838, she states her ongoing respect for reformist opinions when "joined to real disinterestedness, toleration and a clear understanding". In fact, these caveats about the process of reform and the persona of the desirable reformer had been core components of her father's politics from the beginning of his career. Godwin's principled opposition to violence and his ambivalence about revolution were clear even from 1793 (vol. 2, 202). In short, there is a case for reading the original text of 1818 in particular as more in keeping with her family and personal milieu than is sometimes recognised (Butler 1994; Hetherington 1997).

The affinities between *Frankenstein* and Mary Shelley's interpretation of Percy's work can be seen in part from her commentary on the latter. In an 1824 note on *Prometheus Unbound*, Mary Shelley described her husband's philosophical system in this way:

> The prominent feature of Shelley's theory of the destiny of the human species was, that evil is not inherent in the system of creation, but an accident that might be expelled […] That man could be so perfectionized as to be able to expel evil from his own nature, and from the greater part of the creation, was the cardinal point of his system. And the subject he loved best to dwell on was the image of One warring with the Evil Principle, oppressed not only by it, but by all, even the good, who were deluded into considering evil a necessary portion of humanity. (P. B. Shelley 1874, vol. 1, 126)

Many commentators have emphasised Mary Shelley's rejection of the theory that humanity could be "perfectionized" (Fleck 1967, 252). As she wrote in her diary in 1822, "let me love, in my fellow creatures, that which is, and not fix my attention on a fair form endued in imaginary attributes" (Fleck 1967, 236). She certainly came to feel that Percy Shelley was rather prone to that vice. Yet a great deal of *Frankenstein* is consonant with the above system, and with this tragic-epic vision of the struggle for progress in human life. I also think there is merit to Percy Shelley's advice to readers in the original Preface he wrote to accompany the text in 1818: that the author had primarily "endeavoured to preserve the truth of the elementary principles of human nature" and that her "chief concern" had been to create "an exhibition of the amiableness of domestic affection, and the excellence of universal virtue" (1994). Neither of these, it need hardly be said, stand in opposition to Percy Shelley's view of the world as Mary outlined it, though the emphasis on domestic affection carries a weight to which I will return.

The key to my reading lies in beginning with the question: *where* are Shelley's "elementary principles of human nature" located within the text? In many ways they are defused among a range of characters – from the vain and egotistical Frankenstein, to the humble and homely De Laceys, the faithful, sympathetic, and nature-loving Clerval, the modest and selfless Elizabeth, or the ambitious but lonely Walton, who longs for a true friend. Above all, however, they are to be found in the creature himself. For all the scholarly debate about post-humanity that circulates around *Frankenstein* in the twenty-first century (e.g., Haney 2006, 78–91; Goss and Riquelme 2007), if we search for a generic figure of "the human" in the text – at the mythic and archetypal level – that figure can only be the creature. To this extent, the creature marks not the non-human or post-human other but the outcast self for the characters within the story. Clues for this reading abound. The subtitle, *The Modern Prometheus*, tends to focus many readers' attention on Frankenstein as a usurper of divine prerogative. However, it is worth noting that in many versions of the myth, including most prominently that of the classical poet Ovid, Prometheus is also the figure who first created man – and he did so out of clay (2010, 7). Fusing the classical with a Christian register, we might look then at the epigraph for the novel, drawn from *Paradise Lost*:

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

This complaint, addressed by Milton's Adam to God, is clearly also the creature's complaint against his feckless creator. The creature later says to Frankenstein "I ought to be thy Adam", though he notes he has become closer to Milton's Lucifer (M. Shelley 1994, 77). The story, in essence, narrates a process by which the world in which we live transforms Adam into Lucifer or, to put it another way, turns humans into monsters.

For philosophical debates about the prospect of perfectibility in the early nineteenth century, the question here is: where is the origin of evil? The debate around progress and perfectibility at this time was almost invariably cast first in a theological register. The greatest intellectual obstacle to arguments for perfectibility in Christian Europe had always been the notion of original sin and the concomitant proposition that fallen man was an inherently wicked creature, capable of salvation only through divine grace

(Passmore 1970, 116–148; Coward 2008, 55–80). This argument was an important philosophical component of the Abbé Barruel's systematic attack on the relationship between "modern philosophy" and the French Revolution in his *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du Jacobinisme*, a text the Shelleys devoured with interest in 1814 (1803; Garrett 2002, 13). By 1816, when *Frankenstein* was being composed, the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars were over, and a wider "theocratic" reaction had gained influence in France and across Europe. Philosophers such as Joseph de Maistre and Louis de Bonald were among the most influential of a wider movement to attribute the pathologies of the Revolution, at least in part, to the failure to understand the social implications of original sin (Armenteros 2011). Protestant theologians and clerics in England were, on the whole, rather more open to notions of perfectibility than their French Catholic counterparts. This can be seen in John Wesley's neo-Arminian views on the possibility of universal redemption, as well as in the popularity of perfectibility doctrine among the leaders of rational dissent (Haakonssen 1996; Gregory 2010, 38). Despite this, many English thinkers remained inclined to find the more millenarian strains of Enlightenment progressivism theologically impudent. Yet, we are reminded repeatedly that the creature was not born malicious. He wished only for sympathy and companionship. He longed to do good. He sought to help others – whether it be collecting wood for the De Laceys or rescuing a drowning child in a river (M. Shelley 1994, 88, 115). If the creature is to stand in for humanity, then the latter is not inherently evil within the mythic framework of the novel.

If the creature is not born evil, then the origin of evil in the novel does not lie in Frankenstein's act of creative hubris. Frankenstein's creation was not inherently destructive or malicious. Despite the obvious and explicit parallels between Frankenstein's scientific explorations and Adam's eating of the tree of knowledge, the "will to knowledge" (as Foucault might label it) is not the crucial or original sin in the novel. The problem, to put it simply, is not "science" as such. The problem may lie partially in bad natural philosophy or hasty attempts to apply its results, but the key issues lie elsewhere. They derive from a failure of sympathy – the initial parental rejection and the myriad rejections that follow from a world unable to embrace a "monster" that is also humanity in the raw. As a facetious haiku of the novel once summarised it – the creature just wants a hug (Bader 2010, 49).

This reading has implications for our understanding of the broader theological politics of the novel. If we view the creature as Adam, or as humanity more generally, then his indictment of Frankenstein comes across also as an indictment of the Christian God in his relationship with humans. As the creature says of *Paradise Lost*, it is a picture of "an omnipotent God warring with his creatures" (M. Shelley 1994, 104). On listening to the creature's tale, Victor Frankenstein admits, in an unusual moment of self-reflection, "I felt what the duties of a creator towards his creature were, and I ought to render him happy before I complained of his wickedness" (M. Shelley 1994, 79). The picture of the creature's fall works at one level as an indictment of parental neglect. At a second level, however, it works as a critique of the Christian God as a *Deus absconditus* in the worst sense – abandoning his creatures to a vale of tears and then condemning their angry and frustrated responses as sin. It is worth noting that this theologically-radical reconstruction of Milton's sacred drama is, in fact, precisely the reading articulated by Percy Shelley in his essay "On the Devil and Devils", written the year after *Frankenstein* was published, and again in his "A Defence of Poetry" in 1821 (1874, vol. 2, 10). It is the same

reading put forward earlier by William Blake in his remark on Milton that "he was a true Poet, and of the Devil's party without knowing it" (2008, 35). The wider history of what has been provocatively labelled "Romantic satanism" has become a theme of scholarship over recent decades (Priestman 1999; Shock 2003). While there is little evidence to suggest that Mary Shelley was a member of the sect, if such a sect existed, this sympathy for the devil is a clear feature of the text. If there is a true monster in the novel, his name is Frankenstein. To this extent, the generations of school children who have confused creature and creator may have been more insightful than is often recognised. More broadly, however, the universal potential for monstrosity emerges as the most salient theme. As Elizabeth declared, after the tragic execution of Justine Moritz for a crime she did not commit: "men appear to me as monsters thirsting for each other's blood" (M. Shelley 1994, 71).

The case for reading the creature as the stand-in for both rebellious Lucifer and raw humanity in the novel is bolstered if we examine the creature's own narrative. The tale of its awakening, and coming to knowledge, is in many ways preposterous. But it is a bowdlerisation of sensationist theories of human development derived distantly from John Locke and embedded at the core of Mary Shelley's parents' philosophy. The creature's impulses are guided by the primary sensations of pain and pleasure. Sensations are combined through a process of association. It begins with "no distinct ideas" – a key and controversial thesis of what had become known as "sensationist" or "associationist" philosophy, and one that had become widely linked to the denial of original sin, particularly among its critics (M. Shelley 1994, 79–81; Passmore 1970, 168).

Importantly, however, the creature is not entirely without natural impulses. These impulses are fundamentally sentimental, social, and aesthetic. He sees a group and wants to join it. He responds positively to the observation of nature and the sound of music. Considered as humanity in the state of nature, this is not the aggressive, egotistical, power-hungry brute of Hobbes (1996, 89). It is not even the asocial and amoral natural man of Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. Like Godwin, who insisted that "man is a social animal" (1798, vol. 2, 386), Mary Shelley shows us a social creature, drawn to others by an organic sensibility and a natural need for sympathy. In the context of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century debates about human nature and its implications for political and moral philosophy, this places the novel loosely in the tradition of "moral sense" philosophy often associated with the Scots-Irish philosopher Frances Hutcheson and, to some extent, his follower Adam Smith. It is a tradition that emphasised a close link between aesthetic responsiveness and moral responsiveness (Cook 2013). This picture of organic longing for interrelationship, even at the molecular level, was also a striking feature of a body of vitalist biomedical philosophy and cosmology from the late eighteenth century that circulated widely in the Godwin-Wollstonecraft-Shelley milieu, and whose echoes can be seen in the allusions to aether and vital fire that pervade the text (Deane 1988; Ruston 2005, 132–138). A rejection of original sin, a sensationist theory of character formation, a vitalist cosmology, a belief in the social origins of evil, and a faith in the prospects of human improvement through time also lie at the core of Constantin-François Volney's *Ruins of Empires*, a work that provides the creature's first literary education and early understanding of human nature and history (M. Shelley 1994, 95; Cook 2007).

Despite his abandonment and loneliness, the creature has a remarkable propensity for good. His initial education, both literary and observational, teaches him the love of virtue

and the hatred of vice. During this time, he remarks, "[a]s yet I looked upon crime as a distant evil; benevolence and generosity were ever present before me, inciting within me a desire to become an actor in the busy scene where so many admirable qualities were called forth and displayed" (M. Shelley 1994, 102–103). The purpose of the creature's autobiography within the novel is to "relate events, that impressed me with feelings which, from what I had been, have made me what I am" (M. Shelley 1994, 92). Throughout the novel, the creature's ambitions are nothing more than to be, and to be treated as, human – in the ethical as well as the physiological sense. It is only bitter experience that teaches the creature to abandon this aspiration. When he is chased away after rescuing a drowning girl, he announces "this was then the reward of my benevolence!" (M. Shelley 1994, 116). Still he seeks a companion who will provide "those sympathies necessary for my being" (M. Shelley 1994, 118). The life he aspires to with this companion, he tells his creator, "is peaceful and *human*" (M. Shelley 1994, 120, emphasis added). He confesses "I am malicious because I am miserable", before ultimately concluding "if I cannot inspire love, I will cause fear" (M. Shelley 1994, 119).

This depiction of the tragic absence of interpersonal connection can be found elsewhere in the novel. It is arguably Victor Frankenstein's imaginative incapacity to sympathise effectively with others that leads him to thoughtlessly create a creature destined for scorn, then to abandon him, then to persecute him. Much has been written about Victor's inability to pursue affective relations with Elizabeth (Mellor 1988). Moreover, his capacity to appreciate the ordinary pleasures of human intercourse is strikingly atrophied when compared with other characters in the novel. Frankenstein is repeatedly represented in the text as a shallow aesthete – someone who rejects people on appearance alone. His reaction to the "repulsive countenance" of the professor of natural philosophy at Ingolstadt, Krempe, predisposes him to reject the latter's opinions, foreshadowing Victor's response to his own creation (M. Shelley 1994, 29). At a deeper level, Frankenstein's distaste for ugliness belies, or perhaps even reflects, a lack of aesthetic and moral sensibility. Certainly, his obsessive ambitions narrow that sensibility. This is clear in his reactions to the natural world. He notes that "winter, spring, and summer passed away during my labours; but I did not watch the blossom or the expanding leaves – sights which before always yielded me supreme delight" (M. Shelley 1994, 38). In this, Victor is contrasted throughout with the natural sympathy and affection of his friend Clerval. According to Victor, in his dark days, it was the latter who "called forth the better feelings of my heart; he again taught me to love the aspect of nature, and the cheerful faces of children. Excellent friend!" (M. Shelley 1994, 51). Clerval is a being "formed in the very poetry of nature" who responds with an immediacy unsullied by abstract thought. A passage from Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" serves to anchor the archetypally Wordsworthian motif in the text (M. Shelley 1994, 130).

Returning to Mary Shelley's description of Percy's philosophical system quoted earlier, it is worth noting that Victor Frankenstein is also a believer in evil. It is Frankenstein's perception of the innate propensity for evil in his creature, and the prospect of its propagation, that leads him to refuse to provide him with a mate. Having decided that the creature is evil, he fears that "a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth" (M. Shelley 1994, 138). From the creature's birth onwards, it is the social assumption that visual monstrosity equates to moral monstrosity that shapes the creature's fate. In this sense, the belief in evil creates evil in the novel.

There is little doubt, I think, that the novel is intended as a cautionary tale. Mary Shelley tells us this repeatedly – both in her Introduction, written in 1831, and via Frankenstein's warnings to the explorer Walton as he encounters him in the Arctic – "learn from me, if not by my precepts at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge" (1994, 35). Yet what, exactly, are readers to learn? I have argued that the primary issue is not the acquisition of knowledge or the aspirations of science. Frankenstein concludes his warning to Walton with an observation: "how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow" (M. Shelley 1994, 35). As many critics have noted, alongside its critique of scientific hubris, the novel contains throughout a celebration of a more homely life of interpersonal sympathy and connection with the natural world – whether human or non-human (Bannerjee 2010).

Is this, in the end, a critique of Enlightenment ambitions for social and human transformation, as many have understood it? Or is it something else? The desire to increase the sphere of sympathy in the workings of moral and social philosophy was a theme of much of Mary Shelley's work – including her critical, historical, and biographical essays. This involved a belief in the necessity of both recognising and regulating the passions. More than twenty years after the publication of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley published a short biography of the Marquis de Condorcet, perhaps the most famous philosopher of human perfectibility of the French Revolution. Condorcet did not, she suggested, "give sufficient force, in his reasonings, to the influence of the passions, especially when exerted over the masses" ([M. Shelley] 1839, vol. 2, 179). She also worried that "like all French politicians of that day, he wished to treat mankind like puppets, and fancied that it was only necessary to draw particular strings in order to draw them within the circle of order and reason" ([M. Shelley] 1839, vol. 2, 186). These remarks correspond with repeated claims throughout Mary Shelley's career that the human capacity for reason had occasionally been overestimated by idealists – a category that may implicitly have included her husband and father. This insistence on recognising the crooked timber of humanity may reflect humbler hopes, in some respects, but the emphasis on love for the ugly, the flawed, and the outcast also highlights a key feature of Mary Shelley's own vision of human improvement as elaborated in *Frankenstein*.

It is certainly possible to construct this as a critique of the Enlightenment emphasis on "reason" and of unrealistic hopes for human rationality. Shelley nonetheless avowed, in agreement with Condorcet, that "it cannot be doubted" that "progress has been made in the general diffusion of knowledge and in the state of society" and she urged philosophers to devote their energy to "bringing the many up to the standard of the few" (1839, vol. 2, 191). The apparent difference was in her emphasis on human sentimental engagement. Yet this emphasis on the role of passion is, in fact, entirely consonant with a considerable body of Enlightenment philosophy on human improvement. While some today associate that philosophy with a hypostasised reason, or what Adorno and Horkheimer called the "instrumental rationality" of the Enlightenment (2002), historically, it was just as often linked to ideas about natural sociability, the human capacity for communion, and the affective morality of interpersonal sympathy. This can be seen in a range of examples including, as it happens, the moral philosophy of Condorcet's wife, Sophie de Grouchy (better known as Madame de Condorcet), who, in 1798, published a French translation of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* – a key text in the tradition of

affective moral philosophy (Rothschild 2007). This emphasis on the positive power of the passions can be seen equally in the vitalist biological theories of the French Revolutionary social scientist Pierre Cabanis, a close friend and collaborator of Volney and another figure to have influenced the Shelleys (Deane 1988). The recognition of sentiment, alongside reason, as an ineradicable feature of human life was also an emergent feature in the later work of Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. Where both Godwin's *Political Justice* and Wollstonecraft's two *Vindications* tended to strongly emphasise the dangers of excessive feeling, Godwin's later novels (and indeed his life of Mary Wollstonecraft) make more room for the positive passions (Mackenzie 1993). In Shelley's novel, it should be said, this is not an endorsement of the excesses of the so-called "cult of sensibility", to which the author, like Wollstonecraft and Godwin, was deeply opposed (Bour 2005; Carlson 2007, 23–65). It is, however, a plea for friendship, companionship, and mutual understanding – even a certain kind of domesticity (Carlson 2019). It is a vision of humanity living more harmoniously with nature, both its own and that of the physical world. If we want to use the sometimes-obfuscating terminology of Enlightenment and Romanticism, the longing for an alignment with, rather than a transcendence of, nature was at least as much an "Enlightenment" ideal as a "Romantic" one – arguably more so. While this might not be the most heroic path towards human emancipation or happiness it is not a denial of their possibility.

There is one respect in which the novel raises genuine questions about the human capacity for perfectibility, pointing to issues that would have troubled its more optimistic champions. Insofar as there is a model of a healthy, functioning community in the novel, it is the De Lacey family, living an agrarian life of modest virtue and mutual affection. The story of Safie, the Syrian Christian companion of Felix De Lacey, rescued from a life of oppression at the hands of a Turk, illustrates the capacity to extend the borders of that community to incorporate those who are different. The story invokes, of course, a period and ongoing stereotype of "oriental" mistreatment of women (Lew 1991). But it also gestures towards the possibility of a cosmopolitan future of post-tribal relations and greater gender equality – a future that would have appealed to the author's parents. It is these people that the creature declares will be the ultimate "arbiters of [his] future destiny" (M. Shelley 1994, 91). When the critical moment arrives, however, the creature is driven from their door. Their instinctive fear of the deformed stranger precludes the possibility of sympathy. Only the blind old man, who cannot see the creature's hideous appearance, can recognise his humanity. The novel's ultimate challenge to advocates of human perfectibility lies here: the problem is not the thirst for knowledge, it is a failure of sensibility and understanding. More specifically, it is an incapacity to recognise humanity in those who differ too radically from ourselves.

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