Walking Towards the Monstrous:

The Masculine Inability to Articulate Emotion in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

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*Frankenstein* is an origin story and a birth narrative, one which traces both the Creature and his creator through their beginnings to their respective final moments on the frozen tundra of the North Atlantic. *Frankenstein* is fraught with anxieties about the nature of monstrosity, its origins and its actions. The novel is also a male dominated plot, in which females exist only to aid in the articulation of masculine emotions. Structured as the plot is, with three concentric narrative circles and three narrators, it is impossible to limit the question of monstrosity to the Creature alone; nor is it useful or interesting to do so. Instead, expanding the question of monstrosity outward, to take into consideration the way in which it is manifest in the narratives of Victor and Walton, the novel’s other two leading men, offers a far more comprehensive view of Shelley’s particular brand of monstrosity. In Walton’s narrative, monstrosity hovers on the periphery, seeping into the letters he writes to his sister, stretching out from his words like inkblots. For Victor, monstrosity haunts and stalks his every action, even as his Creature does the same. The novel’s three narrators converge as social outcasts, through their own volition or no, on the icefields that Walton dreams will lead him to glory. A ship stuck in ice serves as their meeting ground and their brief moment of social collusion, before it too rejects them. Each man who narrates his story shares a fundamental fact with the other; he lacks a female romantic companion through whom he may articulate and externalize his emotions. This lack of a female counterpart causes the men to turn inwards, their emotions unexpressed and festering, while they are either ejected from the society they inhabit, or themselves reject its domesticity, and themselves become something monstrous. Both Victor and Walton find themselves unable to survive within the bounds of society, unable to articulate their emotions to themselves or to others, forcing them into solitude and in Victor’s case, making them revert to a baser physical means of expression. Robert Walton is the first encountered narrator, an explorer by desire, whose entire narrative is epistolary in nature, detailing the events of Victor’s storyline to his sister, Margaret. Victor’s narrative is addressed to Walton, coming from the cracked and weak voice of a dying man, driven to exhaustion from exposure and the desire for revenge.

The endings of the narrators are inauspicious; Victor dies on the isolated ice floes of the North Atlantic while Walton faces failure and admits defeat in the face of his failed arctic expedition. Not every human male in the novel finds society unbearable; Alphonse Frankenstein, Clerval and Little William are among those who manage to function within the realm of society with ease, as well as Walton’s unnamed brother-in-law. These characters are mentioned only fleetingly and only Clerval receives the same level of narrative attention as the female characters Elizabeth Lavenza and Margaret Saville. These males are also shown to have female counterparts, such as Victor’s mother and William’s “little *wives*” (Shelley 93), or to assume feminine coding themselves, the way Clerval does when he assumes the role of Victor’s “only nurse” (Shelley 88) during Victor’s period of illness after his Creature’s animation. These men who have shown themselves capable of existing in society also have some form of feminine energy near them through which they can articulate their emotions. Those who do not have this feminine influence, like Walton and Victor, are found to be too monstrous to survive within the bounds of society.

As Shelley’s novel is fraught with anxieties to do with the nature of monstrosity, so the word itself is anxious about its own meaning. There is no absolute definition of “monstrous” and in a novel as concerned with the supernatural as *Frankenstein* is, the definition becomes even more tangled. Glen Cavaliero rightly argues that in novels of the supernatural, the novelist exposes the “simultaneous necessity and impossibility of defining absolute truth” (Cavaliero 14). This dual nature of truth is also applicable to the definition of monstrosity, expressed in many forms throughout the novel; violence, hatred, murder and acts of destruction, as well as the perverted birth narrative of Victor and his Creature among them. However, it is necessary in this essay not only to isolate, but to reduce the quality of ‘monstrous’ into one meaning; ‘monstrous’ comes to be the quality characters possess when they have no way to articulate their emotional experiences, turning those same emotions inward, creating an inarticulate rage, and driving the person further from the bounds of society. For this essay, a person becomes monstrous when they are unable to express an inner emotional life.

In *On Monsters* Stephen Asma traces the roots of humanity’s interest in monster stories from mythological monsters into the present day horror fantasy. Included in this book is, of course, a discussion of the Creature of Victor Frankenstein. Asma refers to the Creature as “the most famous of gentle-hearted giants gone bad” (Asma 11), implying that the Creature was not born with his terrible rage, but rather that it grew in him, a malevolent rotting thing that eventually subsumed the gentler nature with which the Creature originated. This argument supports the working idea of this essay that monstrosity stems the inability to articulate emotions, leaving them to fester and translate into action rather than words. The question then becomes: what causes such a malignant growth? Asma places the blame for the Creature’s monstrous nature in the hands of Victor Frankenstein. Asma notes that “the failure of society in general to provide a space for him [the Creature]” (Asma 11) can also be blamed for the Creature’s growth into a monster. The lack of a social space provided for the Creature means a lack of companionship and exposure to females. This in turn means a lack of ability to articulate the emotions the Creature experiences. The Creature instead must internalize his emotional experience, and his initial contact with society is marked by the way “one woman fainted” (Shelley 132) upon seeing his face, not exactly a heartwarming moment. With his initial contact with society so unwelcoming, it is no wonder the Creature steps away from society and into monstrosity. The Creature explains his state of being to Victor: “shall I not hate them who abhor me?” (Shelley 127). The Creature feels keenly his separation from the society which denies him the domestication he so desperately craves. He is painfully aware of the damage the lack of someone to aid in his emotional articulation brings upon him.

The Creature is undeniably the most monstrous of all Shelley’s narrators in this sense, but hardly the most interesting. Victor too moves from a fairly normal, if overly ambitious adolescence, into the realm of monstrous adulthood as his narrative unfolds. Victor’s story begins in his family home in Geneva and ends in death on the ice. Somewhere in between, something must have happened to cause Victor to become the man exhausted and driven by thoughts of revenge that Walton meets in the first pages of the novel. Walton too, is a man who walks hand in hand with the monstrous, alone and friendless as he is in the ice-packed hell-scape of the North Atlantic. The lack of female companionship, a quality which is shared between the two men, or the lack of a person through whom they can safely articulate their emotions is at the root of this stepping towards the monstrous.

It is this lack of articulated emotion which creates the sense of monstrosity and violence so prevalent in Shelley’s novel. Kate Ferguson Ellis details how Shelley uses “violence in the novel to constitute a language of protest” (Ellis 185), a self-conscious commentary on society’s treatment of women. While this claim may be true, the language of violence mentioned by Ellis is also used by Victor to express the emotions he finds himself incapable of verbally articulating. This same language of violence leads to the inability to exist within the bounds of a society. In the world Shelley creates in her novel, “evil deeds are the result of emotional deprivation” (Filmer 23) and have a causal relationship to the doer’s life, rather than being spontaneously generated out of some personality defect. Each of the narrators of the novel, existing as they do within each other, grow further and further from articulated emotions, each speaking “as one who has been denied the experience” (Ellis 181) of domestic affection. Victor and Walton both walk, at varying speeds, toward monstrosity.

Walton, the first encountered narrator of the novel, is first met in St. Petersburg, planning to leave behind the domestic world of his sister and society in general in search of the mythical Hyperborean realm (Shelley 49). Walton is perhaps the most uncomplicated example of the mental shift to emotional monstrosity he and Victor undergo. As Walton’s story begins he is planning to travel away from society at the peak of his narrative he is stuck in the ice of the North Atlantic and in his final pages he is returning home, back into the bosom of society. Walton is the least monstrous of the two human narrators, in that his movement away from society is never completed he turns around and goes home. Still, he possesses all the markers of a man capable of becoming monstrous, and like Victor, finds he cannot survive within the bounds of society by choice. Instead, Walton dreams of glory, his desires focused on dominating the world of arctic exploration, a “favourite dream of [his] early years” (Shelley 50). Walton’s entire narrative is told through letters, which are addressed to his sister Margaret. These letters provide an outlet through which Walton can not only relate the happenings of everyday life, but also a place in which he may vaguely articulate his emotions. Walton is a man who, in the words of Kate Ferguson Ellis, is guilty of “worshipping domestic happiness” (Ellis 182), yet he is also a man who views a return to the domesticity his sister inhabits as a failure. In one of his first letters to his sister, Walton states that if his trip is a success it may be “many, many months, perhaps years” (Shelley 52) before he again sees his sister. He is aware that in order for his work to be successful he must reject the comforts of society. Despite this inability to view himself as successful while he resides within the bounds of society, Walton still feels “bitterly the want of a friend” (Shelley 53). In his letter to Margaret he expresses a desire for a companion who may share in his enthusiasm and success, as well as his failings. Walton wants a companion through whom he may articulate his emotional experience, one whose “eyes would speak to [his]” (Shelley 53). This desire for a companion with whom Walton may share emotional experiences indicates that the only form of emotional articulation Walton has are the letters he writes to his sister. In the letters he is able to engage in the domestic affection and life of a sister in whom he finds an entirely passive recipient of his emotional experience.

Walton’s letters are a safe space for the man to exhibit and feel his emotions. He is a man whose “career… was shaped by his sister” (Ellis 185), and whose only remaining connection to the larger world is through their communications. Despite the relative privacy of the letters exchanged, Walton remains unable to fully articulate his emotions in them. Instead, he relies on his sister to interpret and validate his emotions, and one such instance occurs when Walton describes his anguish upon realizing he does not have the talent to become a poet. His description of the emotion he felt at that time is to state that Margaret is aware of “how heavily [he] bore the disappointment” (Shelley 51). He is incapable of fully describing the effect the event had on him, even years later. Instead it is his sister’s responsibility to make sense of the emotions the young and thwarted Walton experienced. Walton knows himself to be unable to describe his own emotions on the eve of his journey, Walton tells Margaret “it is impossible to communicate to you a conception of the trembling sensation” he is experiencing (Shelley 55). He knows himself to be limited in his powers of emotional articulation, and again places the responsibility of making sense of his emotions on Margaret in her receipt of his letters.

Walton is the only one of the three narrators to return to the society from whence they came, against his own wishes though it may be. Heralding his return to Margaret he declares that he has “consented to return, if we are not destroyed” (Shelley 237). Walton’s return to society and his sister is not a return he wishes for himself, but rather a retreat his men force him to make, due to inclement weather. He views it as a personal failing that he must leave the isolation the ice and the promised glory to return to the society and emotionally articulated world of his sister.

Victor, like Walton, is a man, who in order to pursue his dreams of academic glory, is pushed beyond the bounds of his familiar society. Kate Ellis argues that Victor represents an extreme form of the “dichotomy between public service and domestic affection that Walton’s career exemplifies” (Ellis 188). As Victor’s narrative progresses, this gap widens, until finally, Victor is forced away from society and into the frozen North Atlantic. Victor’s separation from his family and their domestic influence begins with his departure from Geneva in order to attend University. This departure is heralded by his mother’s death (Shelley 72), signaling the beginning of the disappearance of Victor’s methods of emotional articulation. Even more obviously, Victor’s journey to Ingolstadt deprives him of Elizabeth, meaning he is separated from the woman who was raised to be his emotional counterpart. In his own words, Victor describes the differences between his old life and new one; his life up until his removal to Ingolstadt had been “remarkably secluded and domestic” (Shelley 74). Victor is aware he has existed in a world which is dominated by emotional content and articulation, and that in doing so he has existed in a space which is crucially different than the world he is moving towards. In moving to Ingolstadt and being exposed to a larger society, a phenomenon Victor describes as taking up a station “with other humans” (Shelley 74), he is moving away from a world dominated by the females who aid in the articulation of the affectionate domestic experience.

Despite this new exposure to other humans, Victor is left peerless and isolated once he actually arrives in Ingolstadt, cut off from any form of domesticity and familiar affection. Ellis describes this transition to Ingolstadt as the separation of the “feminine sphere of domesticity and the masculine sphere of discover” (Ellis 183). In order for Victor to pursue his academic ambitions he, like the previously discussed Walton, must remove himself from this domestic sphere of family and enter the colder world of discovery. Victor does this with the kind of single-minded focus that leads him to build an entire being in his dorm room, not returning to Geneva for the intervening six years between the commencement of his education and his brother’s murder (Shelley 106). This movement from the domestic takes not only an emotional toll on Victor, but a physical one as well. Wearied by his exertions to create life, Victor describes himself as “pale with study…emaciated with confinement” (Shelley 82). For him the effect of the separation of the domestic and social is a physical as well as mental transformation. This physical degradation is further reinforced in the illness which overtakes Victor hours after his Creature’s animation. Domestic life is forcibly injected back into Victor’s experience by the arrival of Victor’s friend Clerval to Ingolstadt, bringing “back my thoughts to my father, Elizabeth, and all those scenes of home so dear to my recollection” (Shelley 87). Mere hours after Clerval’s arrival, Victor yields to the exhaustion he has brought upon himself through his work, lapsing into a “nervous fever which confined me for several months” (Shelley 89). Though Victor is fully capable of articulating the physical toll this takes on his body stating that he was “lifeless and did not recover my senses for a long time” (Shelley 89), he cannot state the emotional cost. Instead the pathos of his illness comes, when he mentions that Clerval keeps the extent of Victor’s illness from his family. This is done for the fear of “how wretched my illness would make Elizabeth” (Shelley 89). Though Victor can describe his physical state of being he has no language to describe his emotional status.

Victor experiences this inability to articulate his emotions in any way beyond the physical as he views the awakening of his Creature. As he gazes upon the twitching misshapen form he has spent two years constructing in secret, Victor is unable to fully articulate the horror and revulsion he feels. Instead, the intensity of his emotions is communicated through his action of running from the room. He pulls away from his supernaturally created pseudo-child, unable to put into the words the emotions coursing through his body. Despite this wordless action, there is a brief moment of emotional articulation within the narrative, though again it depends upon Elizabeth. Rather than articulate his emotions himself, Victor’s subconscious does the job for him, using Elizabeth as a way to articulate the horror Victor has created. As he lies in a fevered sleep, Victor dreams he embraces Elizabeth, watching horrorstruck as her body transforms into a rotting corpse his arms, until she comes to resemble the Creature he has brought to life (Shelley 85). That Victor, immediately after having his dreams of glory at having creating his Creature dashed, dreams of the woman in whom he will later place all of hopes for a successful future turned carrion in his arms cannot be ignored. Even in her absence Elizabeth proves to be invaluable to Victor in understanding his own mind. When his consciousness cannot confront the reality of his creation, his subconscious uses Elizabeth as a way to process his horrific success and its ramifications. Upon waking, Victor again is incapable of putting words to his emotions, and instead flees the scene of his terribly successful experiment, walking through the streets of Ingolstadt like a terrible spectre of himself. Victor describes himself as walking “with quick steps, as if [he] sought to avoid the wretch” (Shelley 86). Again his emotional experience is turned into a physical one, unable to mentally confront his emotions, he seeks to physically move away from them and the scene wherein they were originated.

This inability to express himself and translate his emotions to words rather than action edges Victor ever further away from the society and domestic affection he had known. From this point onward, Victor’s emotions begin to move inwards, driving him ever closer to the edge of monstrosity. When Victor returns to his home of Geneva upon the news that his youngest brother has been murdered and that a family friend is accused of the deed, he is silent on behalf of his own inner turmoil. He does not share his secret project with his father or Elizabeth, instead allowing them to interpret his emotional upheaval as a result of his brother’s murder. And this is very likely part of his complex emotional web, but again Victor allows Elizabeth the privilege of speaking for both herself and Victor. In this case, Elizabeth also articulates the grief of the whole Frankenstein family, acting as the mouthpiece as she declares their “misfortune is doubly hard” (Shelley 107) due to the loss of both William and the accusation of Justine. Elizabeth is also the mouthpiece for the conviction she and Victor share that Justine is innocent. At the trial of Justine, Elizabeth speaks on behalf of the accused girl though she herself is “violently agitated” (Shelley 110). Later, as Victor and Elizabeth speak with the condemned girl, Elizabeth is the one who informs Justine that Victor “is more convinced of your innocence than I” (Shelley 114). Of his own emotional state of being, Victor declares that “none ever conceived of the misery that I endured” (Shelley 115), this being of course, because he was unable to speak of his misery. Like Walton, Victor may hint at his emotion, but leaves the burden of their articulation to Elizabeth. His emotions exist in degrees of comparison to Elizabeth’s; however miserable she is, Victor states that he is more so. If she is not the mouth-piece of his emotions, then she is the prism through which they are passed and made visible. This inability to speak his emotions renders Victor less of a human and more of a spectre haunting the action. He hovers just outside the edges of society, not a part of it, but not wholly separate either.

Elizabeth’s importance to Victor becomes irrefutable in the latter half of Victor’s narrative. After the Creature requests Victor to create a female for him, someone share to in a life that is “not happy but harmless” (Shelley 170), Victor is forced further out of society by his acquiescence. Victor’s despair at having agreed to this project is so great that even “the gentle affection of [his] beloved Elizabeth was inadequate to draw me from the depths of despair” (Shelley 173). In the contemplation of creating yet another horrific creature Victor pulls further into himself, and away from his family and the affection they offer to him. He is eventually forced from his home through the undertaking of such a task. Due to the creation of a female, the marriage of Victor and Elizabeth is delayed. Victor must “perform [his] engagement, and allow the monster depart with his mate” (Shelley 177), before he can be happy in a union with Elizabeth. The construction of a second creature forces Victor from familiar society; he flees into Scotland, the northern highlands, and ends eventually on one of the “remotest of the Orkneys” (Shelley 188). The island Victor inhabits for the duration of his task is almost abandoned, save “three miserable huts” (Shelley 188). Here he is, for the first time in his narrative, nearly entirely physically and mentally isolated. Cut off from Elizabeth as he is, Victor comes the closest he ever has to understanding and resembling his Creature. Victor, constructing His second monster, experiences a range of emotion as he “looked towards its completion with a tremulous, eager hope, which [he] dared not trust [himself] to question” (Shelley 188). Isolated from society entirely, engaged in terrible work and slowly turning inwards, Victor is aware of the emotions he experiences, but denies them. He is aware of his inability to process these emotions, and knows there is no letter coming from Elizabeth to aid in their articulation. He is also painfully aware that he is removed from any form of the familiar domestic he so desperately craves, thinking often “of Switzerland; it was far different from this desolate and appalling landscape” (Shelly 188-9). Just as Victor stalked the streets of Ingolstadt after his Creature awakens, so the Creature haunts Victor’s footsteps, a reminder of the inhumanity Victor perches just steps away from.

As Kate Ellis speaks of the language of violence in Frankenstein, a language which becomes more prevalent as the story winds down, and Victor finds words fail in the attempt to express his emotions. Instead he expresses himself through physical action as he begins the final descent into an inarticulate rage that leaves behind a body count and ends on the ice floes of the North Atlantic. As the completion of the female draws nearer, Victor becomes cognizant of his emotions. Recalling the moment of his Creature’s animation, Victor articulates with shocking clarity the way his first creation’s “unparalleled barbarity had desolated my heart, and filled it forever with the bitterest remorse” (Shelley 190). After this moment of articulation, Victor immediately tears the body of the female to pieces while his Creature looks on. Victor, in this moment, destroys the Creature’s only hope for future happiness, his violent actions expressing more clearly than words his denial of his Creature’s emotional being. The entire exchange is wordless and an inarticulate, even the Creature’s reaction is a “howl of devilish despair and rage” (Shelley 191). In their moments of intense passion, words fail both creator and Creature as they act out the silent tableau of emotions that can never be verbalized. The Creature retaliates by murdering Elizabeth on her wedding night, reducing Victor to a lonely creature like himself.

Raised as siblings and later for the purpose of marriage, the death of Elizabeth signals the end of Victor’s ability to articulate his emotions. They were aware of their eventual marriage even from a young age, they were “taught to look forward to it” (Shelley 210), raised in such a way as to ensure their future domestic happiness. Poised as Victor is on the edge of monstrosity by his act of destruction, he is aware that Elizabeth and her domestic affection tether him to humanity. He declares that Elizabeth’s “gentle voice would soothe me when transported by passion, and inspire in me human feelings” (Shelley 213). Reeling from the death of Clerval and from his own power for destruction, Victor states that Elizabeth “wept with me, and for me” (Shelley 213). She becomes not only his way to articulate his emotions, but a liminal space in which his own emotions are expressed when he finds himself incapable of doing so. Victor is aware of the fact that he remains poised on the edge of a monstrous inhumanity, one glimpsed in his destruction of the female creation, and he knows that Elizabeth is tethering him to humanity, however tenuous the connection.

It can be no surprise then that upon Elizabeth’s death, Victor is lost to his emotions, with no other mode of expression than violence. After Elizabeth’s murder, Victor finds himself “exhausted: a film covered [his] eyes” (Shelley 219). Unable to express the depth of his emotions, he is momentarily physically overcome by them. This moment signals the beginning of Victor’s decent into monstrosity, a man who is unable to live within society so long as his adversary remains, violence his only means of expressing his rage and hatred for the Creature he made. His narrative voice becomes a blur of frenetic movement and anger, his emotions threatening to overcome him and forcing him to action in order to relieve them. Without Elizabeth, Victor falls from a man able to function within social boundaries, into a man driven by revenge, someone who “had formed a resolution to pursue [his] destroyer to death; and this purpose quieted my agony, and provisionally reconciled me to life” (Shelley 221). As a dying Victor relates these final weeks to Walton, he reminisces that “revenge alone endowed me with strength and composure” (Shelley 223). In his final days, revenge becomes Victor’s only reason to live (234), whole his only method of expression becomes destruction, his whole being focused upon the destruction of his Creature, as his only method of emotional communication. He is driven from Switzerland, driven from land and civilization entirely, dying a broken and isolated man on a ship lodged in the ice of the North Atlantic, unrecognizable as the idealistic young man who wanted so desperately to unlock the secrets of life. Instead he is a monstrous parody of his former self, a man driven by death and hate.

In *Frankenstein* Mary Shelley shows monstrosity to be something any human, driven from society and without means of expression, can embody. While Walton walks towards monstrosity and is turned away, Victor dives head long into it, reduced to something hate-driven and at times nearly feral. As anxious as *Frankenstein* is about the nature of monstrosity, and what it means to be truly monstrous, that two bourgeois men who seemed to have the world before them find themselves unable to articulate their emotional experience is perhaps the most unsettling. Victor and Walton have every avenue to success available to them, and find themselves to be failures, thwarted in their dreams and unable to share in the emotional existence of themselves and others. Monstrosity for Shelley is not an inborn thing, but a result of men’s impoverished emotional life, in turn the result of the rigid and unnatural separation of the world of the female and male. Walton is a man who walks towards monstrosity, yet stops just short of embodying it. Victor on the other hand, careens nearly headlong into his monstrosity. Victor by the end of the novel is an emotional equal to his Creature, his only means of expression physical action. Both men, when faced with a lack of a female counterpart, draw inwards and are forced away from society proving that monstrosity is a quality which all humans can obtain.

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