

Frankenstein on Language and Becoming (Post)Human

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Abstract



The “monster” in Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is a body forced to become *human* by itself, without any help from other human beings. This process necessarily fails, because there is no humanity without sociality. The case of the “monster” is confronted with two similar cases: Condillac’s statue in *Traité des sensations* and Wittgenstein’s “private language” in *Philosophical Investigations*. What the “monster” lacks is an external social and linguistic mirror where it could recognize itself as a human being. But the “creature” is still too human to endure its new post-human condition. The main theoretical consequences of such a hybrid state are analyzed here. In particular, the paper ends with the proposal of a tentative concept of “post human community.”

Keywords: Shelley’s “monster,” Condillac’s statue, Wittgenstein “private language,” Lacanian “mirror stage,” post human community.

Resumen

El “monstruo” en *Frankenstein* de Shelley es un cuerpo forzado a convertirse en humano por sí mismo, sin la ayuda de otros seres humanos. Este proceso está condenado al fracaso, porque no hay humanidad sin socialidad. El caso del “monstruo” es confrontado con otros dos casos parecidos: la estatua de Condillac en *Traité des sensations* y el “lenguaje privado” en Wittgenstein en *Investigaciones Filosóficas*. Lo que al “monstruo” le falta es un espejo externo, social y lingüístico, dónde poder reconocerse a sí mismo como ser humano. La “criatura” es todavía demasiado humana para sobrellevar su nueva condición post-humana. En este artículo se analizan las principales consecuencias teóricas de tal estado híbrido. En concreto, este trabajo finaliza con la propuesta del concepto provisional “comunidad post-humana”.

Palabras clave: “monstruo” de Shelley, estatua de Condillac, “lenguaje privado” en Wittgenstein, “estadio del espejo” de Lacan, “comunidad posthumana”

Premise

In this paper, the question of the animality of the human is addressed in an atypical way. This question will not be addressed by an analysis of the presumed “animal” component of human being; the actual peculiar animality of human being is imbued with artificiality and language (Cimatti *Il taglio*). In fact, such ‘animality’ is not animal at all. Animal humanity is something that lies neither in the present human condition, nor in the phylogenetic past of *Homo sapiens*. Moreover, the question of animal humanity is the question of a post-humanity that places itself beyond the very boundary between humanity and animality. From this point of

view, the figure of the “creature” in *Frankenstein* is proposed as a possible example of a living being who tries (even if it does not succeed) to live a post-human condition.

Logical loneliness

“I desire the company of a man who could sympathize with me, whose eyes would reply to mine,” writes Robert Walton to his sister Margaret in the second letter of *Frankenstein*, while preparing for departure for the North Pole. From the very beginning *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* shows itself to be a history of the vicissitudes of recognition and self-recognition in human life:

You may deem me romantic, my dear sister, but I bitterly feel the want of a friend. I have no one near me, gentle yet courageous, possessed of a cultivated as well as of a capacious mind, whose tastes are like my own, to approve or amend my plans. How would such a friend repair the faults of your poor brother! I am too ardent in execution and too impatient of difficulties. But it is a still greater evil to me that I am self-educated. (7-8)

The “greater evil” is self-education, that is, an education not mediated by another human being, the teacher. Self-education is a sort of oxymoron, because the very concept of “education” implies the presence of at least two entities: the teacher (even if s/he can be absent, as in the case where the teacher is a book) and the pupil, where the first one is supposed to know, and the second one is supposed not to know (such an asymmetry seems to apply in non-human animals also: see Caro and Hauser). On the contrary, Robert Walton tries to educate himself. One can read Mary Shelley’s novel as the story of the disastrous consequences of self-education (one has not to forget that Walton’s expedition fails).

Self-education poses to some extent the same logical and philosophical problems that a “private language” poses to its unlucky users. A language, like English, is a radically public entity. For example, when Mary uses the word “monster” I can understand what she says just because the meaning of the English word she is using is not private. If the word “monster” were private, that is, if Mary intended “monster” as referring to a private and subjective thought in her own mind, nobody could understand her. When one uses a word, what matters is its public meaning; even if Mary has a very atypical conception of what a monster is, if she wants to be understood she has to use the word “monster” according to the public rules that regulate its intersubjective use. A radically “private language” cannot be understood. However, the problem of a “private language” is even greater. In the previous example, Mary cannot use the word “monster” according to a private meaning; otherwise, nobody can understand her. This is obvious. Nevertheless, Mary has to face a more serious problem. Imagine that Mary privately decides to assign to the word “monster” the private meaning M. Since Mary distrusts others, she does not make a written note of this decision either. When she utters the word “monster,” in fact she intends her private meaning M.

The logical problem now arises of how she can be sure of correctly using the word “monster.” No *external* voice can confirm or disconfirm its use. Ludwig Wittgenstein addresses such a problem in *Philosophical Investigations*:

258. Let's imagine the following case. I want to keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation. To this end I associate it with the sign 'S' and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation. – I first want to observe that a definition of the sign cannot be formulated. – But all the same, I can give one to myself as a kind of ostensive definition! – How? Can I point to the sensation? – Not in the ordinary sense. But I speak, or write the sign down, and at the same time I concentrate my attention on the sensation – and so, as it were, point to it inwardly. – But what is this ceremony for? For that is all it seems to be! A definition serves to lay down the meaning of a sign, doesn't it? – Well, that is done precisely by concentrating my attention; for in this way I commit to memory the connection between the sign and the sensation. – But 'I commit it to memory' can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connection correctly in the future. But in the present case, I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem correct to me is correct. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'correct'.

The impossibility of a “private language” refers to a general character of human life: humanity—like language—is not something one is equipped with at birth (Cimatti, *La vita*). A body *becomes* human when confronted with a preexisting human (and linguistic) community. For this reason, every form of specific *human* activity—like language learning—that claims to be self-sufficient, seems to be destined to fail. Walton's self-education faces a similar problem. Mary Shelley warns the reader that what s/he is going to read is about the anthropological paradox that is implicit in every attempt to become autonomously human outside of a human community.

“Le désir de l'homme est le désir de l'Autre”

Victor Frankenstein works hard at “infusing life into an inanimate body” (49); but when he finally reaches his goal, he does not recognize it: “Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room” (50). This is an anthropological sin connected to the “birth” of the “monster” (see Rowen, Zimmerman). The “father” does not look at his “son.” More generally, the preexisting human community does not host within itself what its previous desire brought into the world. What the “monster” seeks is just such a humanizing look. Throughout the book, the “monster” seeks nothing other than such a look. Nobody recognizes this body as human. It is a “monster”: it is given the name of “uncanny” forms of life. A “monster” is like a “thing,” something that language still does not precisely recognize (a “monster” is not a “cat,” a “dog,” a “child,” and so on). From this point of view it is significant that “Frankenstein” is popularly believed to be the creature's proper name; its name would be the name of its creator, that is, the name of he who refused to give to the creature a proper name. There is no other

name for it. Since it properly does not exist as human being, it cannot be named with a proper name either.

Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus is a Lacanian novel; it is the novel about what happens when the “mirror stage” does not succeed. This “experience sets us at odds with any philosophy directly stemming from the *cogito*” (Lacan, *Écrits* 75). The *cogito* is such an entity that does not presuppose the previous existence of any other entities:

Then too there is no doubt that I exist, if he [the deceiver] is deceiving me. And let him do his best at deception, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I shall think that I am something. Thus, after everything has been most carefully weighed, it must finally be established that this pronouncement “I am, I exist” is necessarily true every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind. (Descartes 108)

The *cogito* is logically and metaphysically alone; it does not need any other entities to state its own existence. On the contrary, the “monster” is a possible *cogito* who cannot sustain its own loneliness. In the “mirror stage,” the infant “can already recognize his own image as such in a mirror. This recognition is indicated by the illuminative mimicry of the *Aha-Erlebnis*, which Köhler considers to express situational apperception, an essential moment in the act of intelligence” (Lacan, *Écrits* 75). What the infant sees in the mirror is an image, and she *is* such an image. The infant sees herself from outside her own body: she is out there, in the mirror. In fact, the “I” is *external* to the very same body that says “I.” This is the difference in respect to the *cogito*: while this is self-sufficient, the infant needs to go out from herself in order to self-recognize. “It suffices to understand the mirror stage in this context *as an identification*, in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes [assume] an image—an image that is seemingly predestined to have an effect at this phase, as witnessed by the use in analytic theory of antiquity’s term, ‘imago’” (Lacan, *Écrits* 76). This is the critical point: the body identifies herself with an external image.

The body needs this external side to think of herself as an identity, as an “I.” Without such a side, the body never reaches the “stable” condition of self-feeling as subject. Victor Frankenstein’s refusal to recognize “his” creature condemns the nameless “monster” to be a humanoid body without identity. This is the dialectic “fuel” of *Frankenstein*: the desire on the part of the “monster” to be recognized by its reluctant “father.” It desires to be desired by Victor: “le désir est l’essence même de l’homme” (Lacan, *séminaire VI* 16). It is important to note that in the “mirror stage” the child recognizes herself in the mirror only if the adult who holds her smiles at her. There is always a third party between the infant and the mirror: an adult—who represents the “great Other”—who ensures the infant that what she is seeing is her own image.

Déjà, rien que dans la petite image exemplaire d’où part la démonstration du stade du miroir, ce moment dit jubilatoire où l’enfant, venant se saisir dans l’expérience inaugurale de la reconnaissance dans le miroir, s’assume comme totalité fonctionnant comme telle dans son image spéculaire, n’ai-je pas depuis toujours

rappelé le mouvement que fait le petit enfant? Ce mouvement est si fréquent, je dirais constant, que tout un chacun peut en avoir le souvenir. A savoir, il se retourne, ai-je noté, vers celui qui le soutient et qui est là derrière. Si nous nous efforçons d'assumer le contenu de l'expérience de l'enfant et de reconstruire le sens de ce moment, nous dirons que, par ce mouvement de mutation de la tête qui se retourne vers l'adulte comme pour en appeler à son assentiment, puis revient vers l'image, il semble demander à celui qui le porte, et qui représente ici le grand Autre, d'entériner la valeur de cette image. (Lacan, *séminaire X* 42)

The child self-recognizing in the mirror depends on the great Other's approval. When the child sees the image, she perceives herself neither as a unitary body nor as a psychological identity. What she properly sees is another living being. She smiles at her because at this early age infants innately smile at strangers. Then her mother says: "Look here! *You* are!" Now the infant can associate the image she is actually seeing with the developing feeling of being such a unitary entity there in the mirror. The bare image in the mirror is not sufficient for self-recognition: the "I" presupposes the Other's approval. For this reason, the "monster" looks for its "father's" look: "le désir de l'homme est le désir de l'Autre" (Lacan, *séminaire X* 32). This is the original fault of the "monster": nobody loves it. But a human being who is not loved cannot exist.

"Che vuoi?"

Notwithstanding such a defective nature, the "creature" tries to become human—that is, it tries to love itself. Its narcissism is not original; it is a paltry compensation for the love it never received from its "father" and from its absent "mother" (see Rubenstein, Marder, and Lehman). The "monster" tries to give to itself what the Other did not give it. But such an attempt obviously cannot succeed. Lacan speaks of such a case when, in *Seminar X*, he excludes the possibility of auto-analysis:

Dans l'analyse, il y a quelquefois ce qui est antérieur à tout ce que nous pouvons élaborer ou comprendre. Cela, je l'appellerai la présence de l'Autre, grand A. Il n'y a pas d'auto-analyse, même quand on se l'imagine. L'Autre est là. C'est sur cette voie et dans la même visée que se place l'indication que je vous ai déjà donnée concernant quelque chose qui va déjà beaucoup plus loin, à savoir l'angoisse. (32)

An effective auto-analysis would entail the very possibility of describing one's own internal states. The problem arises that one cannot describe one's own private mental states with a private language, because such a language does not exist. Therefore, one can only describe oneself using a public language, that is, the words of the Other. This means simply that the Other describes me. I am what the Other says I am: *L'Autre est là*. But this is exactly the desperate task of the "monster": to do without the Other. The problem is that "L'Autre est celui qui me voit" (Lacan, *séminaire X* 33): what *am* I if nobody sees me? The Other is more than a physical entity like a mother or a father. The Other is a query; "*Che vuoi?*" (14), asks the creature of the Other. The problem is that nobody asks anything of the "monster."

From the very beginning of its sad life the “monster” looks in vain for its “father’s” attention:

I [Victor] started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed; when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped and rushed downstairs. (Shelley 50)

The “father’s” eyes are not looking at his “son,” but the “creature’s” eyes look greedily at its “father’s” face. What Laplanche called the “situation originaire adulte-enfant” (1987) is inverted: the adult/Other is not the one who looks at the body of the newborn. From the very beginning it is the newborn who looks for someone who looks at it: “his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me.” The “monster” also tries to speak, but anything it could have said, “I did not hear.” The problem here is not that what it says is unintelligible; Victor does not want to hear it. Victor does not look at “his” son.” In the famous encounter on the glacier, the “monster” explicitly accuses him:

“Devil,” I [Victor] exclaimed, “do you dare approach me? And do not you fear the fierce vengeance of my arm wreaked on your miserable head? Begone, vile insect! Or rather, stay, that I may trample you to dust! And, oh! That I could, with the extinction of your miserable existence, restore those victims whom you have so diabolically murdered!”

“I expected this reception,” said the daemon. “All men hate the wretched; how, then, must I be hated, who am miserable beyond all living things! Yet you, my creator, detest and spurn me, thy creature, to whom thou art bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us. You purpose to kill me. How dare you sport thus with life? Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind.” (94)

The “monster” is not a human being, it is a “vile insect,” the living being that most resembles a mechanical thing. It is well aware of its own completely “unnatural” condition: “you, my creator, detest and spurn me, thy creature.” In fact, Victor’s hatred for his own “creature” could be motivated more by its extraordinary self-sufficiency than by his own *hybris*. Maybe Victor is not astonished by what he directly did; perhaps he is amazed by how the “monster” managed to survive *alone*. What is at stake in *Frankenstein* is not the sacrilegious overcoming of the limits of nature. *Frankenstein* is a Lacanian novel of envy and desire to be desired. On Victor’s side, there is the envy for the “monster’s” radical independence from him; on the “monster’s” side, there is the desire to be desired by its forgetful “father”:

Oh, Frankenstein, be not equitable to every other and trample upon me alone, to whom thy justice, and even thy clemency and affection, is most due. Remember that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. (95)

“I ought to be thy Adam” says the “monster” to the Other/father. But the Other does not recognize his creature, he does not look at it. Therefore, the “monster” is condemned to an inhumane condition of solitude and despair:

How can I move thee? Will no entreaties cause thee to turn a favourable eye upon thy creature, who implores thy goodness and compassion? Believe me, Frankenstein, I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity; but am I not alone, miserably alone? You, my creator, abhor me; what hope can I gather from your fellow creatures, who owe me nothing? They spurn and hate me. (95)

At birth, the “creature,” like any other living creature, is “benevolent.” It is ready to love and to be loved, to look at and to be looked at. The problem immediately arises when Victor realizes that his “son” does not really need his help, because it is already a mature and strong body. The glance they exchange immediately after the “monster’s” “birth” shows Victor that they are at the very same level. This is not the Laplanche “situation originaire adulte-enfant,” where an adult takes care of a helpless infant, where it is apparent who gives and who receives; the “monster” is already a self-sufficient body. The paradox is that the one who most needed to be recognized is Victor. The “monster’s” gaze shows him that the eyes that are looking at him are similar to his own eyes. Victor is the modern Other who immediately realizes that he is nothing but a “semblant,” that is, “le signifiant en lui-même” (Lacan, *séminaire XVIII*). Victor would have needed to be recognized by the “creature” as the Father; in fact, Victor sees in front of him nothing but another human body. The *Frankenstein* drama is that while Victor is well aware of this condition, the “creature” continues to search for a Father who recognizes it as son. “Begone! Relieve me from the sight of your detested form,” Victor shouts at the “monster.” He does not want to see what reminds him of his own insignificance. At least the “creature” realizes its destiny: “‘Thus I relieve thee, my creator,’ he said, and placed his hated hands before my eyes, which I flung from me with violence; ‘thus I take from thee a sight which you abhor’ ” (96).

“It was dark when I awoke”

But how does the “monster” succeed in becoming human by itself? Shelley follows the model of Condillac’s mute statue (see Pollin). According to Condillac, a living body can acquire all the knowledge it needs to survive by sensory experience alone. Condillac tries to demonstrate such a thesis by imagining a living statue that gradually acquires knowledge using its different senses. The key point is that the statue faces such a development alone:

Le principe qui détermine le développement de ses facultés, est simple; les sensations mêmes le renferment: car toutes étant nécessairement agréables ou désagréables, la statue est intéressée à jouir des unes et à se dérober aux autres. Or, on se convaincra que cet intérêt suffit pour donner lieu aux opérations de l’entendement et de la volonté. Le jugement, la réflexion, les désirs, les passions, etc. ne sont que la sensation même qui se transforme différemment pourquoi il nous a paru inutile de supposer que l’âme tient immédiatement de la nature toutes

les facultés dont elle est douée. La nature nous donne des organes, pour nous avertir par le plaisir de ce que nous avons à rechercher, et par la douleur de ce que nous avons à fuir. Mais elle s'arrête là; et elle laisse à l'expérience le soin de nous faire contracter des habitudes, et d'achever l'ouvrage qu'elle a commencé. (*Traité* 11-12)

Through repeated sensory experiences, the statue can acquire “idées abstraites et générales” about the world. Shelley’s description of the mental development of the “creature” is similar: it learns gradually to distinguish different entities in external and internal reality that at first appeared as formless masses: “It is with considerable difficulty that I remember the original era of my being; all the events of that period appear confused and indistinct. A strange multiplicity of sensations seized me, and I saw, felt, heard, and smelt at the same time; and it was, indeed, a long time before I learned to distinguish between the operations of my various senses” (99). At the end of this process, the statue is able to survive in the world. However, what kind of life is the one it actually lives? “Toute entière à la recherche d’une nourriture, que je suppose extrêmement rare, elle mènerait une vie purement animale. A-t-elle faim ? Elle se meut, elle va partout où elle se souvient d’avoir trouvé des aliments. Sa faim est-elle dissipée, le repos devient son besoin le plus pressant; elle reste où elle est, elle s’endort” (Condillac, *Traité* 211). For Condillac, the possibility of developing a complete *human* life outside of a human community is excluded:

Il est même vraisemblable, qu’au lieu de se conduire d’après sa propre réflexion, elle prendrait des leçons des animaux, avec qui elle vivrait plus familièrement. Elle marcherait comme eux, imiterait leurs cris, brouterait l’herbe, ou dévorerait ceux dont elle aurait la force de se saisir. Nous sommes si fort portés à l’imitation, qu’un Descartes à sa place n’apprendrait pas à marcher sur ses pieds: tout ce qu’il verrait, suffirait pour l’en détourner. (*Traité* 211)

The solitary life of the statue is “une vie purement animale.” What is missing that could radically change its mind is language. According to Condillac, language is mainly a cognitive device which dramatically transforms the human mind. Take the case of voluntary memory:

§39 As we have seen, memory consists in the power we have to recall signs of our ideas or the circumstances that have accompanied them; but this power will not act except when, owing to the analogy of the signs we have chosen and the order we have established among our ideas, the objects we wish to revive pertain to some of our present needs. In short, we cannot recall a thing unless it is at some point connected with some of those things that we control. For a man who has only accidental signs and natural signs has none that is at his command. Thus his needs can cause only the exercise of his imagination, and by that token he will be without memory.

§40 On that basis we conclude that animals do not have memory and that they have only an imagination which they cannot direct. (*Essay* 37)

A memory appears in the mind of the statue only when some external stimulus reactivates it. Such a memory does not depend on the statue’s will; on the contrary,

its memory causally depends on what the statue casually perceives. This is the reason why Condillac can sustain that “animals do not have memory.” On the contrary, a human being can control her memory using “the signs we have chosen.” For example, someone can try to think of a specific event of her own past even if nothing in the actual situation is connected to such an event. The sign referring to such a memory functions as an address in an information storage system: the sign “tells” the mind where the stored memory is located. In this sense, human memory is context-free. For Condillac, language is more than a communicative system; rather, it is a “method” of thinking. However, how does the mute statue manage to master a language? Condillac imagines such a situation: “I am assuming that two children, one of either sex, sometime after the deluge, had gotten lost in the desert before they would have known the use of any sign” (*Essay* 113). The natural “mutual discourse” between them—made of actions, play, sensations and so on—would make them

connect the cries of each passion to the perceptions of which they were the natural signs. They usually accompanied the cries with some movement, gesture, or action that made the expression more striking. For example, he who suffered by not having an object his needs demanded would not merely cry out; he made as if an effort to obtain it, moved his head, his arms, and all parts of his body. Moved by this display, the other fixed the eyes on the same object, and feeling his soul suffused with sentiments he was not yet able to account for to himself, he suffered by seeing the other suffer so miserably. From this moment he feels that he is eager to ease the other's pain, and he acts on this impression to the extent that it is within his ability. (114-115)

The two children invent what Condillac refers to as a “language of action,” which precedes the arbitrary languages that human beings now use. This is exactly the key point: the “language of action”—whatever its historical and psychological credibility (see Gleitman and Landau)—is already a *social* language. At the very beginning, there were *two* children.

In contrast, Shelley's “creature” begins its unorthodox language development through a solitary attempt to imitate the natural sounds (see Allen): “Sometimes I tried to imitate the pleasant songs of the birds but was unable. Sometimes I wished to express my sensations in my own mode, but the uncouth and inarticulate sounds which broke from me frightened me into silence again” (100). However, if someone feels the need to express her own sensations, that means she already participates in language and communication. Only someone who knows that language exists can have the desire to communicate something. The desire to communicate is an effect of the existence of language, not the cause of such an existence; therefore, it cannot be the foundation of language. This is a key point: the “creature” is not properly a human being, because a human community has not recognized it *as human*. At the same time, the “monster” is naturally equipped with the specific *human* predisposition to acquire a language. This is the dilemma of its condition: it is not human, but it is not nonhuman either. On the one hand, it feels the need of a language; on the other, this need is not

justified by some social need because its life is radically solitary. The possibility of the language of action is precluded for the creature. Spying from the hut on the De Lacey family's life, the "creature" acquires the use of names:

By degrees I made a discovery of still greater moment. I found that these people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds. I perceived that the words they spoke sometimes produced pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness, in the minds and countenances of the hearers. This was indeed a godlike science, and I ardently desired to become acquainted with it. But I was baffled in every attempt I made for this purpose. Their pronunciation was quick, and the words they uttered, not having any apparent connection with visible objects, I was unable to discover any clue by which I could unravel the mystery of their reference. By great application, however, and after having remained during the space of several revolutions of the moon in my hovel, I discovered the names that were given to some of the most familiar objects of discourse; I learned and applied the words, 'fire,' 'milk,' 'bread,' and 'wood.' I learned also the names of the cottagers themselves. The youth and his companion had each of them several names, but the old man had only one, which was 'father.' The girl was called 'sister' or 'Agatha,' and the youth 'Felix,' 'brother,' or 'son.' I cannot describe the delight I felt when I learned the ideas appropriated to each of these sounds and was able to pronounce them. I distinguished several other words without being able as yet to understand or apply them, such as 'good,' 'dearest,' 'unhappy.' (109)

This is the difference between the "creature" and a nonhuman animal: its language predisposition makes it easy to grasp the concept of nomination. While a nonhuman animal does not realize that names stand for objects, the "creature" is able to discover that "the names" refer "to some of the most familiar objects." In such a way, the "creature" understands the basic mechanism of language. It realizes what language is from an external point of view, like an anthropologist in a "radical translation" situation (Quine). However, while Quine's anthropologist can ask a native speaker if he has correctly understood the foreign language (jungle language), the "creature" cannot. The anthropologist, like any other human being, acquires a language through the mediation and help of other human beings. In contrast, the "monster" does not have such a possibility. Therefore, it places itself at once inside and outside language. In fact, it learns alone to produce linguistic sounds: "My organs were indeed harsh, but supple; and although my voice was very unlike the soft music of their tones, yet I pronounced such words as I understood with tolerable ease" (112). In this paradox, which is both logical (because there is no such a thing as a private language) and anthropological (because there is no human being outside of a human community), the "monster" places itself in a strange situation: it is neither human nor animal. On the one hand, it is too human to simply live like an animal; on the other hand, it is not human enough to be accepted by a human community.

According to the philosophical and psychological tradition of which Lacan is part (Cimatti, *Il taglio*), it is language that makes us human because it splits the (prelinguistic) human organism into two parts: body and mind. Human language constitutes such an anthropological apparatus (Agamben), which isolates an "I" from the body, a psyche from the flesh. From this point of view, language's main

effect is not communication; rather it is transcendence and separateness. In this sense, language makes human beings separate from “their” bodies and from other people. Language does not make community possible; on the contrary, it makes it impossible. Human language exists just because human psyches are separate and distinct. Therefore, there is no principled difference between Condillac’s “langage d’action” and human language. On the contrary, non-human languages seem more apt to make possible a communal condition between different animals and between animals and nature. While human language separates living and nonliving bodies, animal languages trace connections between them. It is in some way paradoxical that the creature looks for a tool like human language that, in the end, will exacerbate its own loneliness. What the creature does not understand is that if salvation exists for it, such a possibility does not lie inside human society, but in animality and nature.

Envy

Frankenstein is the story of a being who is at once both inside and outside society. It is outside, because no one recognizes it as a human being; it is inside because it confusedly feels that it is similar to human beings. From this liminal position, the creature looks at the human society with a strong and violent feeling of envy. Considered this way, *Frankenstein* is the Lacanian novel of look and envy.

La Mettrie, in *L’homme-machine*, asks: “Qu’était l’homme, avant l’invention des mots et la connaissance des langues?” (52). The thesis of La Mettrie is that if a monkey could be trained to use a symbolic language, there is nothing in its nature that prevents it from learning to speak like a human being: “Pourquoi donc l’éducation des singes serait-elle impossible? Pourquoi ne pourrait-il enfin, à force de soins, imiter, à l’exemple des sourds, les mouvements nécessaires pour prononcer?” (49). In a sense, the “creature” is like a “singe” exposed to human language, like a lion and its tamer:

On a dressé un homme comme un animal; on est devenu auteur comme portefaix. Un géomètre a appris à faire les démonstrations et les calculs les plus difficiles, comme un singe à ôter ou mettre son petit chapeau et à monter sur son chien docile. Tout s’est fait par des signes; chaque espèce a compris ce qu’elle a pu comprendre: et c’est de cette manière que les hommes ont acquis la connaissance symbolique. (53)

The “creature” trained itself. It has been its own master. Therefore, the question it poses to itself—“What was I?”—has no answer at all. Only another person could have answered such a question. Then, who is the “monster”? What does it mean to become human without a human mirror?

As I read, however, I applied much personally to my own feelings and condition. I found myself similar yet at the same time strangely unlike to the beings concerning whom I read and to whose conversation I was a listener. I sympathized with and partly understood them, but I was unformed in mind; I was dependent on none and related to none. “The path of my departure was free,” and there was none to lament my annihilation. My person was hideous and my stature gigantic. What did

this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them. (Shelley 126)

A nonhuman animal lives its own life, which can be hard and brief, but it is the life it has to live. That is, a nonhuman animal completely adheres to the life it actually lives. There is no psychological distance between the animal and its life. That is, a nonhuman animal probably does not reflect upon its life, asking itself if it is the right life to live: it simply lives this life. This is the condition of *animality* (Cimatti, *Filosofia dell'animalità*). From this point of view, the “creature” is not a nonhuman animal. On the other hand, the “creature” actually lives like a nonhuman animal; in particular, it lives far from human communities, in the woods or glaciers. Aristotle seems to be speaking of this when he describes the condition of a radically “citiless” man: “it is clear that [...] man is by nature a political animal, and a man that is by nature and not merely by fortune citiless is either low in the scale of humanity or above it” (9). Since the “creature” is not an animal, it is “above” normal human beings in the “scale of humanity.” Maybe this is the reason Victor hates his own “son.” *Frankenstein* is a Lacanian, or better Kleinian, novel because its main theme is envy. This includes both the envy that Victor feels with respect to a creature that is “above” him in the “scale of humanity,” as well as the envy that the “monster” feels with respect to the life of nonhuman animals which do not need the look of the Other. It also reflects the envy of every creature whose life is radically solitary with respect to the Other who looks elsewhere.

The “monster” is a new, desperate Adam:

Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature, but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition, for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me. (127)

While the first, lucky Adam has been “guarded by the especial care of his Creator,” the new and sad one, the “monster,” never received the warm and loving look of its “father”; it was left “wretched, helpless, and alone.” For Lacan, “anxiety” is the emotional state that each human being is confronted with from birth. In the presence of the look of the Other, we feel anxiety. Lacan compares such a blind look to the praying mantis’s eyes where “je ne voyais pas ma propre image dans le miroir énigmatique du globe oculaire de l’insecte” (*séminaire X 14*). The Other is an enigmatic mirror that, to some extent, stares at me, but it does not reflect “my” image. The “anxiety” is the original existential state of being watched by someone even if nobody watches us.¹ In the case of the “creature” there is no such Other.

¹ Such a Lacanian example could be used as an overall description of what a human feels while being watched by a nonhuman animal. I discussed this question in Cimatti, *Filosofia dell'animalità*

Indeed, the “creature” wants nothing more than an Other who watches it. With respect to the Other, the human prototypical question is “What do you want?” (*Che vuoi?*). However, in this case the question is inverted: “Why don’t you want anything from me?” (*Perché non vuoi nulla da me?*). If anxiety is correlative to the oppressive though elusive presence of the Other, in *Frankenstein* we are faced with a similar but different feeling: envy. For Melanie Klein, “envy appears to be inherent in oral greed. [...] envy [...] is first directed towards the feeding breast” (78). The “creature” is envious of the “feeding breast” it never had, of the mother it cannot have; Victor is envious of the self-sufficiency of his “son,” who immediately after birth was complete and autonomous. Both have been deprived of something: love in the case of the former, the rewarding feeling of being needed for the latter. Victor does not properly feel able to represent the Other with respect to the “creature”: both are mature men, equipped with fully developed bodies. Moreover, the “monster” is much stronger than Victor (“You are my creator, but I am your master” (169) the “creature” says to Victor on asking him to “create” for it a female companion). However, the “creature”—like any other human or almost human being—needs nothing more than to be loved and “to obtain one look of affection from” the “eyes” of someone (142). Therefore, the “creature” is torn between two contrasting feelings; the pity it feels for its weak and heartless “father,” and the violent envy it feels for the love it never received—a love it imagines that the lives of all other human beings enjoy:

I pitied Frankenstein; my pity amounted to horror; I abhorred myself. But when I discovered that he, the author at once of my existence and of its unspeakable torments, dared to hope for happiness, that while he accumulated wretchedness and despair upon me he sought his own enjoyment in feelings and passions from the indulgence of which I was forever barred, then impotent envy and bitter indignation filled me with an insatiable thirst for vengeance (223).

Post-human community

Anxiety and envy, to look at and to be looked at, to love and to be loved—the “creature” oscillates between these contrasting feelings. The theoretical point of the sad story of the “monster” is what type of humanity—or post-humanity—Shelley is addressing. *Frankenstein* is more about the way we become human than about the risk of creating hybrid monsters. The problem is not the risk of violating nature; quite the contrary, the risk is that Victor Frankenstein does not violate it enough. Even if the “creature” is stronger than us, even if it properly needs neither mother nor father, even if its body heralds for us a future of mixture between flesh and technology, it is still too human to endure this new condition. From a biological point of view, the “creature” does not need the dramatically complex and laborious “anthropological machine” (Agamben) that every “normal” human

(2013). It is important to note the difference between Lacan’s perspective and Derrida’s (2008) perspective. For Lacan, the animal gaze makes us anxious and confused; for Derrida it makes us somewhat more sensible to the presence of the animal *qua* sentient being. While in Lacan the animal gaze is mainly uncanny, in Derrida it is mainly ethical.

animal requires in order to come into existence. The “creature” is a body literally made of flesh and iron; it is a fully technical body (Braidotti). At the same time it is a typical human body because it needs the look of the Other to exist as psychological unity, as subject. In this sense, it really is a “monster” because it is placed at the boundary of two radically different ways of living. From the biological perspective, it is already a perfect example of the post-human body; from the psychological perspective it is still a typical human subject.

In fact, there is a moment, during the painful process of the “creature’s” self-education, where it is apparent that two diverging ways of developing are present: the first one is the conventional one, becoming human. The envious “creature” who looks for love, looks for other human beings, and wants to learn to speak and to read. This way inevitably fails, because the “monster” is not properly human. The other way is barely visible. It shows itself when the “creature” is surprised by nature. In such moments, it is no longer envious or furious. There it confusedly realizes that a non-human life is also possible, which does not presuppose the presence of humans. In the first human life, language, oral and written, dominates: “The words induced me to turn towards myself” (Shelley 117). This means that without words the “monster” would have not been forced to reflect upon itself. The “creature” is a *subject* just because it speaks. Through language it becomes human, that is, an entity split into two separate parts: on one side bare body, on the other mind. When a being is split, it becomes aware of its own mortality, because the mind is “separated” from the body, and it can look at it from outside: “Of what a strange nature is knowledge! It clings to the mind when it has once seized on it like a lichen on the rock. I wished sometimes to shake off all thought and feeling, but I learned that there was but one means to overcome the sensation of pain, and that was death—a state which I feared yet did not understand” (Shelley 117). For a split being, only death can give some relief from the troubles that inexorably follow thought.

However, there is another possible way of living, which presents itself at the very beginning of the “monster’s” life, when envy and language have not yet fully occupied its body, when “all the events” that it experiences are “confused and indistinct” (99). Here the “creature” is simply part of what is taking place. Here it is not properly alone because only someone who thinks of itself as a separate entity—a Subject or an “I”—can feel the sensation of being alone. Here the “creature” simply participates in the intrinsic movement of life; here it coincides with the life that it is living:

Soon a gentle light stole over the heavens and gave me a sensation of pleasure. I started up and beheld a radiant form [the moon] rise from among the trees. I gazed with a kind of wonder. It moved slowly, but it enlightened my path, and I again went out in search of berries. I was still cold when under one of the trees I found a huge cloak, with which I covered myself, and sat down upon the ground. No distinct ideas occupied my mind; all was confused. I felt light, and hunger, and thirst, and darkness; innumerable sounds rang in my ears, and on all sides various scents saluted me; the only object that I could distinguish was the bright moon, and I fixed my eyes on that with pleasure. (100)

It is worth noticing that this is one of the very few moments in *Frankenstein* where the experience of seeing is not painful and sad; it is no accident that what the “creature” is watching is the moon, an “inanimate” natural object. In such a moment, the “creature” takes part in a “block of becoming” (Deleuze and Guattari 238) with moon and sky. Finally, there is some “pleasure” for the “creature.” Therefore, a possibility exists for the “monster” to exist beyond the human look, to live a life that is not solitary and desperate. Shelley barely hints at such a non-envious (non-linguistic) way to live because she mainly presents Victor as a sorcerer's apprentice. Even though such a possibility exists. The psyche of the “creature” is too human to believe in the moon, but its body is already sufficiently post-human not to be scared by such an *impersonal* pleasure.

The figure of the nameless “creature” can help us imagine what a “post-human community” could be, even if it does not succeed in living in such a community. The “creature” cannot help but look back to humanity, instead of looking forward to a new form of life no longer marked by the distinction between humanity and animality. First of all, such a community is not a *political* community, that is, a community made of different psychological and ethical subjects. The life in such a “post-human community” is regulated neither by ethics nor by law. The bodies that live in such a community are not the kind of bodies that have to think of themselves as “psychological identities.” That is, such bodies do not pass through the “mirror stage.” They do not need to be ratified by the Other in order to be allowed to participate in social life. Such bodies are simple, living beings, beyond subjectivity and personhood, therefore without the basic social feeling, envy. More precisely, such bodies have not the property of being alive, they *are* life; there is no difference between their being bodies and their being alive. The *cogito* exists by “himself” and has the additional property of being a living body too. Instead, in the post-human community there are only living bodies: “we will say of pure immanence that it is A LIFE, and nothing else” (Deleuze 27). It is important to note that such “life” is not what is usually considered the contrary of non-living things. This is what Victor Frankenstein thinks; for example when he “infuse[s] a spark of being into the lifeless thing” (49).

As in the post-human community, the distinction between humanity and animality does not apply anymore, and the distinction between life and thing also no longer applies. Therefore, when Deleuze speaks of “life,” he in fact speaks of what he calls an “haecceity,” a state where it is no longer possible to distinguish between life and thing, human beings and animals. Therefore, an “haecceity” is such an unusual “mixture” that conventional scientific, humanistic thought is unable to imagine it: “A degree of heat, an intensity of white, are perfect individualities; and a degree of heat can combine in latitude with another degree to form a new individual, as in a body that is cold here and hot there depending on its longitude. [...] A degree of heat can combine with an intensity of white, as in certain white skies of a hot summer” (Deleuze and Guattari 261). This could be the world

of the “creature,” if only it were not so similar to a human being. Humanity means the restless need to name, divide, and classify. The post-human community is the simple and bare nature. The “creature” does not succeed in becoming an “haecceity,” that is, to simply participate in the flow of life. However, sometimes it does not feel the world in the usual humanistic way, that is, as object: “Spring advanced rapidly; the weather became fine and the skies cloudless. It surprised me that what before was desert and gloomy should now bloom with the most beautiful flowers and verdure. My senses were gratified and refreshed by a thousand scents of delight and a thousand sights of beauty” (113). In a post-human community, no more do we have subjects on one side and objects on the other. Following this line of thought, it is interesting to note that Deleuze and Guattari speak of the “creature” only to criticize its nostalgia for the condition of a body recognized as a *unitary* body, that is, a body that passed through the “mirror stage”: “You can make any list of part-objects you want: hand, breast, mouth, eyes... It’s still Frankenstein. What we need to consider is not fundamentally organs without bodies, or the fragmented body” (171). Such a body is “still Frankenstein,” that is, a body that can be known only with the name of its “father.” On the contrary, the body Deleuze and Guattari imagine “is the body without organs, animated by various intensive movements that determine the nature and emplacement of the organs in question and make that body an organism, or even a system of strata of which the organism is only a part” (172). The “creature” could have become a “body without organs,” a “system of strata,” but it did not succeed. It failed, but it indicates for us a direction.

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