

‘A devout but nearly silent listener’: dialogue, sociability, and Promethean individualism in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818)

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The Romantic period has often been characterised as marking a shift towards the inward and individual, and away from the public reason and sociability seen as characterising the Enlightenment era. As much recent work on this period shows, to posit such a simplistic break between earlier eighteenth-century thinking and Romanticism, with the latter characterised as a retreat from public life into lone interiority and individualism, is misleading.¹ Marilyn Butler argues that the second wave of Romantic poets, such as Byron, Keats, and Percy Shelley, pursued a neoclassical critical rationalism that retained the spirit of Enlightenment radicalism in contrast to, say, the later Wordsworth and Coleridge.² Moreover, many writers in the Romantic period cultivated a sociability that was, in some ways, a continuation of the public rationality of the earlier period.³ Note, for example, the eminently social, communicative role the poet has in Percy Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry* (1821): ‘[T]he pleasure resulting from the manner in which [poets] express the influence of society or nature on their own minds, communicates itself to others, and gathers a sort of reduplication from that community.’⁴

This article argues that Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel, *Frankenstein*, continues that dialogism. Born out of conversation — the famous talks at the Villa Diodati in 1816 (the ‘year without a summer’), where Mary Shelley was an ambivalent listener — and out of the Jacobin novel, this novel features formal dialogues that, I argue here, function as an echo of radical dialogues that demanded universal human rights.⁵ *Frankenstein* is subtitled ‘The

¹ Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite’s edited collection *Romantic Sociability* is an excellent example. See *Romantic Sociability: Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain, 1770-1840*, ed. by Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

² Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries: English Literature and Its Background, 1760-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 113-37.

³ Butler talks of ‘the rejection of the way of solitude for the poet’ by the younger poets in opposition to the celebration of reclusiveness by Wordsworth (p. 141).

⁴ Percy Bysshe Shelley, Preface, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *The Major Works*, ed. by Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 674-701 (p. 676)).

⁵ A huge volcanic explosion in Indonesia in April 1815 had caused darkness and cold across the northern hemisphere throughout 1816 and after, with almost apocalyptic consequences. Examples of radical dialogues are Sir William Jones, *The Principles of Government; in a Dialogue Between a Scholar and a Peasant. Written by a Member of the Society for Constitutional Information* ([n.p.]: Society for Constitutional Information, 1783); and Thomas Day, *A Dialogue Between a Justice of the Peace and a Farmer* (London: John Stockdale, 1785).

Modern Prometheus'; as this article argues, Shelley uses the ambiguous Romantic avatar of Prometheus to dramatise uneasy tensions between Enlightenment ideas of progress and sociability, and a destructive bourgeois individualism. Rather than opposing scientific and social progress, *Frankenstein* is critical of those constraints that, in Jürgen Habermas's view, have made the Enlightenment an unfinished project.⁶ These tensions coalesce around the figure of Prometheus who, with some Romantic-period writers, bore a number of contradictory aspects that, drawing on Herbert Marcuse's account of Prometheus, I set out below. This conflict, between a destructive Prometheanism and the liberating potential of a socialised urge to knowledge, fuels the tragic plot of the novel. Frankenstein's creature inherits his creator's isolating individuality, but through no fault of his own. He is exiled from conversation, from dialogic exchange and society, by others. Dialogue is a key concept in this dialectic of the social and the individual, both as a genre and as the practice of a communicative rationality that aims to overcome the competitive individualism of capitalist society.

I begin, then, by setting out the background of dialogism that shapes the novel. Then I introduce the figure of Prometheus, favoured by radical Romantics for his rebellious humanism, and invoked by Marcuse, whose dual-edged critique of Enlightenment may illuminate Shelley's novel. I then return to the actual dialogues embedded in the novel; notably, the creature's claim of universal rights. Finally, I glance at the utopian adventurism of the narrative; this, too, is distorted by the anti-dialogic forces that I observe being critiqued throughout.

Dialogism in *Frankenstein*

The formal dialogue, as much as the novel, is arguably the dominant genre of the eighteenth century. This was a period that fostered and valued dialogue in itself, which was sustained through the institutions described by Habermas as forming the public sphere: the dialogue genre itself proliferated; a great many dialogues were written on a wide range of topics. And the genre permeates and modulates the early English novel.⁷ The novel is defined in part by

⁶ These derive from the contradiction between the utopian promise of early liberal thought and the potential of technology, with the actual exploitation of capitalism and the application of a narrow, functionalist reason to the 'lifeworld' in the service of that exploitation. See Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity: An Unfinished Project', in *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, ed. by Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 38-58.

⁷ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

its generic hybridity; it is constructed, as J. Paul Hunter shows, out of component genres such as the confession, the letter, and the essay.⁸ The dialogue, too, can be one of these components — many eighteenth-century novels feature embedded dialogues.⁹ And the dialogue form was revitalised and gained new energies amidst the political controversies and tensions of the 1780s and 1790s. Formal dialogues — representations of political and philosophical debates on the model of Plato's Socratic dialogues — are qualitatively different to novelistic conversations, which aim rather at verisimilitude and the representation of character. Such structured exchanges of ideas can be found inserted within many novels of the late century, particularly the 'Jacobin' novels by writers such as Robert Bage, Thomas Holcroft, and Mary Shelley's father, William Godwin.¹⁰ This communicative reason was practiced among the Shelley circle, and dialogism and the dialogue genre play an important part in *Frankenstein*.¹¹

Frankenstein itself emerged out of dialogue; in her 1831 Preface to the third edition, Mary Shelley recalls the background of the novel's genesis, which will be very familiar to many readers. She writes, '[m]any and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley, to which I was a devout but silent listener'.¹² She is referring here to the summer of 1816, when Byron, accompanied by his physician, John Polidori, had rented the Villa Diodati near Lake Geneva; Percy Shelley and the then Mary Godwin were frequent visitors. Alongside fervent conversations on science and supernaturalism, 'on 16 June three members of the group each agreed to write a ghost story': Godwin's story would be worked up as her novel *Frankenstein*.¹³ Butler, too, notes the dialogic background and the origin of the work in

⁸ J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990).

⁹ This was especially the case in Jacobin novels but also elsewhere: Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801) is a fine example; Sarah Fielding's *The Cry* (1754) foregrounds the genre; Elizabeth Hamilton's *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800) makes use of the device, though more to parody it. Other novels bear traces of the form, as I demonstrate with regard to Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) in 'Jane Austen's Conversational Pragmatics: Rational Evaluation and Strategic Concealment in *Sense and Sensibility*', *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal On-Line*, 32.2 (Summer 2012) <<http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol32no2/hughes.html>> [accessed 2 October 2017].

¹⁰ See Gary Kelly, *The English Jacobin Novel 1780-1805* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 121-22, 163-65. Notable examples are Thomas Holcroft, *Anna St Ives* (1792); Robert Bage, *Hermesprong* (1796); and John Thelwall, *The Daughter of Adoption* (1801).

¹¹ 'Communicative reason' refers to Habermas's notion of a rationality 'ingrained in the use of language oriented to reaching understanding' inter-subjectively. See Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functional Reason*, trans. by Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity, 1985), p. 397.

¹² Mary Shelley, 'Author's Introduction to the Standard Novels Edition (1831)', in *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus: The 1818 Text*, ed. by Marilyn Butler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 192-97 (p. 195).

¹³ Butler, Introduction, *Frankenstein*, p. xv. See further for the story's origin, pp. xx1-xxxiii.

‘sophisticated, satirical conversations’ in the Enlightenment spirit.¹⁴ Thus the dialogues that Mary Godwin eagerly listened to (while not always participating in directly) and a more general current of literary dialogism fostered her novel. And there are intertextual ‘conversations’ in the novel with William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, too, as Elisabeth Bronfen reveals.¹⁵ The allusiveness of Mary’s multifarious readings of and exchanges with others and other works can be seen as a form of discursive chaos that has to be shaped, as Prometheus moulded humans out of clay, from ‘dark, shapeless substances’ that are, Bronfen claims, analogues of ‘the *component parts*’ of a creature.¹⁶

Prometheus

Prometheus is the Trickster figure who aids humankind (even, in some versions, creating them first from clay), who bestows on them all the gifts of civilisation, including fire stolen from the gods.¹⁷ This is the liberating Prometheus — a rebel against tradition and tyranny, who defies the tyrannical Zeus and is punished for it. As Hephaestus tells Prometheus when he is binding him to the rock face in punishment: ‘Such is your reward for favouring mankind; for as a god you did not cower before the gods when you bestowed privilege upon men beyond what was just.’¹⁸ What is ‘just’ here is, of course, problematised by Aeschylus, and with considerably more force and plainness by Percy Shelley. In Percy’s verse drama *Prometheus Unbound*, ‘averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the Champion with the Oppressor of mankind’, he envisages the overthrow of the tyrant Zeus and a new republic of emancipated individuals in social harmony. Perhaps it is cheating a little to invoke *Prometheus Unbound* (which was published slightly later, in 1820), but it is not unreasonable to see these themes circulating among the dialogic exchanges at the Villa Diodati in 1816.

¹⁴ Butler, Introduction, pp. xvii-xviii (p. xxvi).

¹⁵ Elisabeth Bronfen, ‘Rewriting the Family: Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in its Biographical/Textual Context’, in *Frankenstein, Creation and Monstrosity*, ed. by Stephen Bann (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), pp. 16-38.

¹⁶ Shelley, ‘Author’s Introduction’, p. 195; Bronfen, p. 29.

¹⁷ The main source for the creation of human beings by Prometheus out of clay is in Ovid (see *Metamorphoses*, trans. by David Raeburn (London: Penguin, 2004), i. 76-88, pp. 8-9). The theft of fire is found in Hesiod; Protagoras in Plato’s eponymous dialogue adds that Prometheus steals the technical skills of Hephaestus (forge work) and Athena (spinning, weaving, pottery), but Aeschylus amplifies this into a long catalogue of cultural and technological benefits bestowed on humanity by Prometheus, including numbers, writing, domesticating cattle and horses, navigation, medicine, augury, and mining. See Hesiod, *Theogony*, pp. 18-21, and *Works and Days*, pp. 38-40, in *Theogony and Works and Days*, trans. by M. L. West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Plato, *Protagoras*, trans. by C. C. W. Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 320c8-322d5, pp. 17-19; and Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, in *Persians and Other Plays*, trans. by Christopher Collard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 101-29 (pp. 113-24).

¹⁸ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, p. 102.

The Romantics were fond of Prometheus. As Chris Baldick asserts, '[t]he widespread cult of Prometheus in Romantic literature is often only a slightly Hellenized variant' of Milton's Satan as 'sublimely heroic rebel'.¹⁹ In Byron's poem 'Prometheus' (1816), the Titan's

Godlike crime was to be kind,
To render with thy precepts less
The sum of human wretchedness,
And strengthen Man with his own mind.²⁰

Likewise, in Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, Prometheus is 'impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends'.²¹ And those ends are potentially a reconciliation of sociality and individuality; humanity here is seen as

a chain of linkèd thought,
Of love and might to be divided not
[...]
Man, one harmonious soul of many souls,
Whose nature is its own divine control [...]. (IV. 394-95, 400-02).

Shelley qualifies the equation of Satan with Prometheus here, depicting Satan as a distortion of the emancipatory figure of Prometheus, as a result of his own egotistical self-seeking:

The only imaginary being resembling in any degree Prometheus is Satan; and Prometheus is, in my judgement, a more poetical character than Satan, because, in addition to courage, and majesty, and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force, he is susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement.²²

And this tainted rebel will, in fact, appear as a variant of Prometheus in Mary Shelley's novel.

In Percy Shelley's journal entry of 22 June 1816, he describes his visit to the Alps: 'All was as much our own as if we had been the creatures of such impressions *in the minds of others*, as now occupied our own'.²³ This poetic vision is Promethean creation, rebelling against the (absent) divinity and creating in his stead, exemplified in the poem 'Mont Blanc'

¹⁹ Chris Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 41, 40.

²⁰ George Gordon Lord Byron, 'Prometheus', in *The Major Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 264-65 (ll. 35-38).

²¹ P. B. Shelley, Preface, *Prometheus Unbound*, in *Works*, pp. 229-32 (p. 230).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 230.

²³ P. B. Shelley, note to 'Mont Blanc', in *Works*, ll. 142-44, p. 723, emphasis added.

(1816), which is a response to Coleridge's intuition of the divine in this same landscape. And this is a *social* creativity, inspiring thoughts in 'the minds of others', just as the poet's mind is in dialogue with nature: 'My own, my human mind [...] | Holding an unremitting interchange | With the clear universe of things around'.²⁴ Amidst these ideas of creative sociability, of dialogic 'interchange', continuing the Enlightenment notion of a public rationality, roams the figure of Prometheus.

But Prometheus has other faces. *Frankenstein* is subtitled 'The Modern Prometheus' and Mary Shelley draws out less benign aspects of the Titan, with Victor Frankenstein as the creator of a subject who is denied his freedom. For Mary Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, the myth of Prometheus' theft is one of many ideological strategies used by priests to exorcise the prospect of political change, by denying the perfectibility of humankind and 'to persuade us, that we are naturally inclined to evil'. Wollstonecraft enumerates such 'wild traditions of original sin' as 'the eating of the apple, the theft of Prometheus, the opening of Pandora's box'.²⁵ In the Genesis story, the transgression of Adam and Eve leads them and their descendents to be cursed with labour, death, and childbirth.²⁶ In Greek myth, Zeus has denied humanity fire but Prometheus steals it for them from the gods. This defiance is punished by his being fettered to a rock while an eagle devours his immortal liver, which renews itself overnight. And the punishment, as with Adam and Eve, is perpetuated down through the generations (through the gods' trickery in creating the woman, Pandora, as a gift to mankind who bears all the evils of human life).²⁷ Though Prometheus for Wollstonecraft is still a symbol of human agency and innovation, and of liberation from archaic tyranny (as he is in *Prometheus Unbound*), the priesthood have therefore cast this very revolt as sin.

Percy Shelley pursues these themes elsewhere, suggesting the pathology of asocial individualism. Butler notes the genesis of Percy's poem *Alastor* of 1815 in introspective practices by the poet that were closely involved with the dialogue between Mary and Percy Shelley.²⁸ In this poem, the spirit of solitude is a malignant spirit.²⁹ And, incidentally, that

²⁴ P. B. Shelley, 'Mont Blanc', ll. 37, 39-40.

²⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*, in *Political Writings: A Vindication of the Rights of Men, a Vindication of the Rights of Woman, an Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*, ed. by Janet Todd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 285-371 (p. 294).

²⁶ Genesis 3.

²⁷ The Pandora story can be found in Hesiod; it is absent from the *Protagoras* and *Prometheus Bound*. See Hesiod, *Theogony*, pp. 20-21; *Works and Days*, pp. 38-40. In the *Theogony*, Pandora is a burden solely because she is a woman; in *Works and Days*, she opens the notorious jar (or 'box') of evils.

²⁸ Percy Shelley 'shows a new interest in keeping records of the processes of his own mind'; Mary Shelley 'claimed to have been present when this [record] was written'. See Butler, Introduction, *Frankenstein*, p. xvii.

other monster from the class of 1816, Polidori's vampire Lord Ruthven, is, like Victor Frankenstein, 'a man entirely absorbed in himself'; the figure of Romantic solitude is frequently rendered as unhealthy in these related texts.³⁰ Romantic monsters, without Promethean emancipation, are asocial, 'self-consumed', exhibiting an atomised individualism. But in Percy Shelley's socially engaged manifestation of Prometheus, the interiorisation of tyranny has been overcome and the isolated, solipsistic individual emancipated; the repressive reality where the subject is 'a soul self-consumed' creeping as 'a vampire among men | Infecting all with his own hideous will' has been transformed.³¹ Thus, in the utopian vision of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, the human being is no longer the 'subject of a tyrant's will', and this liberation is also the liberation into a more communal life.³²

By contrast, Byron's 1816 outcast, Manfred, has an alienated view of knowledge, where '[t]he Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life'; life and knowledge have been severed from their original Edenic unity.³³ Byron's poems around this time often stress that human beings are clay — their dull matter drags them down until sublimated by that Promethean spark. Like Frankenstein, Manfred pursues 'sciences untaught | Save in the old time' (II. 2. 84-85) and has 'dived [...] to the caves of death | Searching the cause in its effect' (II. 2. 80-81). He seeks oblivion, to be free from the curse of knowledge. Manfred's spirit is a 'Promethean spark' (I. 1. 154) 'though coop'd in clay' (I. 1. 157). Thus the solitary individual here is both creator and creature — an instability that is found in Shelley's novel too and of which I will say more later.

The Godwinian ideal of a qualified individualism, one that through the exercise of reason is free from tyranny, allows for the possibility of a myth of Promethean theft that is emancipatory rather than a constraining admonition. This ideal will emerge more fully in Percy's drama; though I do not explore this in detail, that ideal hovers behind *Frankenstein*. In Mary Shelley's novel, it is adumbrated as a potential against which contemporary heroic individualism is measured critically. Yet *Frankenstein* also gives voice to a more repressive kind of Prometheanism.

²⁹ As an example of the older view of Romanticism as uncomplicatedly introverted, Butler says that 'the Victorians [...] found the hostility of the "young Romantics" hard to credit', leading to a misreading of *Alastor* as inward and asocial (*Romantics*, p. 141).

³⁰ John Polidori, 'The Vampyre', *The Vampyre and Other Tales of the Macabre*, ed. by Baldick (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 1-235 (p. 5).

³¹ P. B. Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, in *Works*, III. 4. 146-48.

³² P. B. Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, II. 4. 130.

³³ Byron, *Manfred*, in *Works*, I. 1. 12.

Repressive Prometheanism

It is illuminating here to look at the work of the Frankfurt School philosopher Herbert Marcuse, who analyses the constraints I have mentioned which prevent the full realisation of the promise of Enlightenment in capitalist society. Marcuse seeks the ‘historical truth value’ of ‘the “culture heroes” who have persisted in imagination as symbolizing the attitude and the deeds that have determined the fate of mankind’.³⁴ Sharing concerns expressed in the novel, he identifies a more Satanic version of Prometheus as the isolated, self-seeking modern bourgeois individual — the antithesis of the utopian model of sociality that the radical Romantics upheld. Marcuse’s use of the figure can help reveal the critical force of *Frankenstein*. As Marcuse says of this version of Prometheus, ‘[h]e symbolizes productiveness, the unceasing effort to master life; but, in his productivity, blessing and curse, progress and toil are inextricably intertwined’.³⁵ Thus, whereas toil in the Greek myth was the gods’ punishment for human transgression, here, the gift of technology and retribution are dealt from the same hand. Marcuse continues, ‘Prometheus is the archetype of the performance principle’.³⁶ The performance principle is what represses the pleasure principle in Marcuse’s account of the irrational restraints by capitalist society on the human drives for an erotically charged freedom. Marcuse adds, ‘[a]nd in the world of Prometheus, Pandora, the female principle, sexuality and pleasure appear as curse [...]. The beauty of the woman, and the happiness she promises are fatal in the work-world of production.’³⁷ Thus Prometheus’s values in this account are both masculinist and utilitarian. Marcuse’s Promethean repression, the surplus repression of drives (that is, over and above what a healthy society might require) parallels Baldick’s description of a process whereby ‘the triumph of [Frankenstein’s] ascetic masculine heroism is a conquest over his own social and sexual being, fulfilled in a creature to whom social and sexual ties are denied’.³⁸ Thus, he cuts his ties with family and friends to create the monster, and even abandons his wife on their wedding night to obtain further knowledge of his foe. In this manner, Shelley’s ‘modern Prometheus’ shares the asociality delineated by Marcuse. The epithet ‘modern’ is an ironic diminishment of its original, in that it points to a figure of lesser stature than the Titanic

³⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1987), p. 161.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Baldick, *In Frankenstein’s Shadow*, p. 51.

Greek original, though it does not imply an antipathy towards modernity as such: it is a criticism of the contemporary alienation that Marcuse exposes as inherent in capitalism.

Emphasising the repressive aspect of Prometheus, where knowledge becomes enslavement rather than liberation, many readers of *Frankenstein* have seen the text as an attack on the hubris of science itself. I want to distance myself from this approach, which, for one thing, is more persuasive when applied to Mary Shelley's revised 1831 edition rather than that conceived in 1816, as Butler has shown.³⁹ Ironically, Mary Shelley's later revisions to *Frankenstein*, and many interpretations since, cause the novel to revert to the ideological purpose of restricting human ambition that her mother had unveiled. The original, more dialectical myth-making of the first edition is less closed and suggests possibilities for human emancipation in the pursuit of knowledge while being critically ambivalent about such knowledge. I agree with Butler's arguments that *Frankenstein*, in the first edition of 1818 at least, was not the condemnation of science and technology that some critics still claim, and that it is not a counter-Enlightenment text. It is a matter, not of science in itself, but of how it is produced under specific social conditions. Baldick suggests that from her father, Godwin, Mary Shelley perhaps gets the idea that 'the detachment of science from social ties' is harmful.⁴⁰ David McNally, too, sees Frankenstein's science as antisocial: 'The great weakness of Victor Frankenstein is not that he thirsts for scientific knowledge but that he pursues it in unhealthy, even dangerous, isolation from social affections and interactions.'⁴¹ Likewise, Markman Ellis shows how Frankenstein's pursuit of knowledge 'is not scientific in its nature, as it remains a secret. Scientific knowledge [...] was knowledge that was verifiable in public.'⁴² Enlightenment science is therefore social, in that it is subject to public validation (as in Habermas's idea of a communicative, dialogic rationality that involves validity claims for truth, which are evaluated consensually).

However, for Ellis, the anti-scientific character of Victor's work is also owing to the pre-Enlightenment vestiges of alchemy that cling to his enquiries. This certainly supports the view that *Frankenstein* is not a denunciation of Enlightenment rationalism, but it complicates my picture of the novel as portraying the repressive force of science as existing in contradiction with its emancipatory potential. Yet if we see the dark occult processes of alchemy as standing in for the other dialectical moment of Enlightenment — its antisocial

³⁹ Introduction, p. li; and 'Note on the Text', pp. lii, liii.

⁴⁰ Baldick, pp. 28-29.

⁴¹ David McNally, *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires, and Global Capitalism* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2012), p. 93.

⁴² Markman Ellis, *The History of Gothic Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 150.

atomism and privatisation of knowledge in the service of capital — my analysis still holds. This points to the constraints that individual interest places on reason under capitalism, where reason is instrumental and not practiced consensually, and suggests that the premodern sources of Frankenstein's science can be interpreted as a somewhat uncertain metaphor. That is, it is not so much alchemy as unenlightened precursor of science that is denounced, as that darkness within modern science itself that works against the human liberty that this very same knowledge may enable. This darkness is made visible in the novel through Frankenstein's refusal to grant rights to his creation and his secretive possessiveness over knowledge.

This draws attention to the production of knowledge, to the division of labour between manual and intellectual, and to production in general. These are concepts that are central to Marx's critique of capitalist society. In Franco Moretti's well-known Marxist analysis, the literature of terror dramatises 'the fear of bourgeois civilization'.⁴³ Conceived together (in 1816 — as mentioned above, Polidori's 'The Vampyre' famously originates in the same dialogic encounters at the Villa Diodati as *Frankenstein*), the monster and vampire as we know them today are the inseparable figures of a split society. Frankenstein's monster, denied a name, is the proletariat. But Moretti is, I think, mistaken in saying that Mary Shelley constructs a scheme 'of simplification and splitting', the split being the division of labour between mental and physical, scientist and monster, with Shelley being acquiescent in this split.⁴⁴ Rather, she complicates that splitting by knowingly exposing the destructive consequences and also, as I show below, by making the monster protean, shifting roles across that fissure. I am not convinced by Moretti's reading of the novel, which renders it more ideological, less critical than I think it is. I do not see this novel as promoting a 'feudal idyll' as Moretti claims — it envisages instead a way of life that is communal while critiquing a narrow version of individual interest. This vision is not necessarily feudal, and the text does not envisage a regression to a lost pastoral ideal.⁴⁵ There is a utopian dimension as well as an ideological one to the world conjured up by Mary Shelley, in Fredric Jameson's formulations.⁴⁶ Moretti's conclusion that the literature of terror wants to deny, illiberally, the

⁴³ Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, trans. by Susan Fischer and David Forgacs, revised edition (London and New York: Verso, 1988), p. 85.

⁴⁴ Moretti, p. 88.

⁴⁵ Moretti, p. 187.

⁴⁶ Jameson's dialectical strategy seeks to be aware of a text's potential to be simultaneously emancipatory and oppressive; Jameson calls the poles of this antinomy 'utopian' and 'ideological'. See Jameson, 'Conclusion: The Dialectic of Utopia and Ideology', *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1983), pp. 281-99.

urge '[t]o think for oneself, to follow one's own interests' is more plausible (though I am wary of generalisations like this; not all such literature can be dismissed thus, surely).⁴⁷ That denial is part of the novel's ideological component, and Moretti's complaint that the monster's demands are reformist — limited to appealing for rights of citizenship while offering to submit to his creator — is persuasive too; the creature insists, pleadingly, 'I will be even mild and docile to my natural lord and king'.⁴⁸ This works against the radical Prometheanism of revolt against authority. However, other elements of the novel have the force of a powerful critique of the foundations of the bourgeois consciousness and an affirmation of a radical sociability.

Moretti argues that, in the literature of terror, metaphors become real (as with the monster being a metaphorical proletariat). But it is more complex than that; the monster simply *is* matter transformed, or invigorated, by human science, while simultaneously being the alienated agent through which capital effects that transformation. That power to reshape the world to suit human desire is what Prometheus stole from the tyrant gods; it offers, says Marx (an avid reader of Aeschylus), '[a] dwelling in the *light*, which Aeschylus describes as one of the great gifts through which he transformed savages into men'.⁴⁹ (Note how the creature's account of his own development recapitulates this transformation in accelerated miniature as he rapidly develops language and intellect — and acquires the use of fire). Under capitalism, this light 'ceases to exist for the worker'.⁵⁰ And, likewise, the *modern* Prometheus imagined by Mary Shelley denies that light to his creature despite the latter's appeals for justice. This Prometheus, through his very modernity (personifying as he does capitalist technology), is at once both repressive and potentially liberating, unlike his ancient precursor or that revived by Percy Shelley.

Thus, though Moretti's figuring of Frankenstein's creature as the working class is pertinent, Shelley's text capitulates less to the fear of that class than he argues for and, in fact, displays an alignment with their interests. David McNally claims that the human body, for capital and to anatomists, is reduced to 'a mere collection of parts'. He draws attention to the special horror of raiding working-class graves for anatomical specimens and how it informs *Frankenstein*. Shelley, he says, makes an 'acute representation of this bourgeois worldview

⁴⁷ Moretti, p. 107.

⁴⁸ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. by Butler, p. 77. All further references are to this edition and are placed in parentheses in the body of the text. See Moretti, p. 86.

⁴⁹ Karl Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844)', in *Early Writings*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), pp. 279-400 (p. 359).

⁵⁰ Marx, p. 359.

— of reified body parts and beings detached from the organic wholes in which they appear'.⁵¹ The radical alienation of workers' bodies in the process of production even extends to after their death and to the production of knowledge. The chaos that the creature is formed from is thus quite literally the product of this alienation, which is now subsumed under a reifying Prometheanism, one which steals from the people rather than emancipating them. And this, McNally says, would have had both a contemporary resonance and a personal one for Mary Shelley: 'In an era in which anatomy had become a flashpoint over the commodification in life and death, this fictional account of proletarian bodies being stolen, dismembered, and monstrosly reassembled would have carried a potent charge.'⁵² In Shelley's novel, however, the mutilated labouring body argues back, and this is where we return to the issue of the dialogue.

The Dialogue in *Frankenstein*

The dialogue form — a key resource for eighteenth-century novelists, as I have said — is conspicuous in *Frankenstein*. Like Frankenstein himself, the creature has immense 'powers of eloquence and persuasion' (p. 188). A reviewer in the *Quarterly Magazine* points to the rhetorical power of the monster, repeating Shelley's phrase, 'the eloquence and persuasion [...] are so because they are truth'.⁵³ This highlights the novel's concerns with argument and exchange; Baldick discusses the "'dialogical" openness' of *Frankenstein*, where 'the moral framework of the novel is dissolved into an open debate between Victor and the monster'.⁵⁴ Thus, here, the dialogism is explicit. The first encounter between Frankenstein and his creature is a set piece of embedded dialogue of the kind to be found in the Jacobin novels, which form an intertextual exchange with Mary Shelley's writing; here, the dialogue highlights the justice of the monster's pleas for his inclusion in the speaking commonwealth of humankind. There is an elision of roles, as the monster casts himself as the being denied rights by his tyrannical creator, Zeus (as humans are in the myth), but also as Milton's rebellious Satan (who is akin to Prometheus, humankind's benefactor): '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' (p. 77). His master has bequeathed him the joyless existence that results when the pleasure principle is unjustly and irrationally suppressed in the name of utility. The monster has, of course, read *Paradise Lost* in his initiation into the communicative entanglement of

⁵¹ McNally, p. 97.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Cited in Baldick, p. 58.

⁵⁴ Baldick, pp. 43-44.

individuals, embodied and reproduced by language and, especially, literature, that is human life.

Though the creature, through this membership of a linguistic community, has expectations of rights owing to him, Frankenstein initially denies any reciprocity between him and his creature, declaring that '[t]here can be no community between you and me', and makes room only for strategic, even violent, action rather than consensual reason.⁵⁵ 'Begone', he says, 'or let us try our strength in a fight, in which one must fall' (p. 78). The monster, countering this, appeals for the preconditions of dialogue to be established, for the liberal rights to a fair trial, and for his inclusion in the human community: 'Listen to my tale [...]. The guilty are allowed by human laws, bloody as they may be, to speak in their own defence before they are condemned' (p. 78). Frankenstein grants him that rational examination of discourse; as he relates, he 'weighed the various arguments that [the creature] had used, and determined at last to listen to his tale' (p. 79). So the structures of mutuality are tentatively established, despite Frankenstein's reluctance. The creature then justifies the foundations of that mutuality by recounting his development as a reasoning, dialogic being, in an account which echoes quite a few Enlightenment speculative narratives about the origins of consciousness and language (pp. 88-92).⁵⁶ His principal, passionate appeal to Frankenstein concerns above all his need for an other with whom he can have 'the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being' (p. 118) (that is, a female companion); he is *more* humanly sociable here than Frankenstein, who had isolated himself from domesticity.⁵⁷

During the course of this dialogue, Frankenstein is partially convinced: 'I was moved. I shuddered when I thought of the consequences of my consent; but I felt there was some justice in his argument' (p. 120). The creature presses his case rationally, demonstrating that he is no threat; he is less voracious than mankind, even: 'I will go to the vast wilds of South

⁵⁵ Habermas contrasts strategic with communicative action; the former is antithetical to dialogue: 'The fundamental form of coordination through language, according to Habermas, requires speakers to adopt a practical stance oriented toward "reaching understanding", which he regards as the "inherent telos" of speech. When actors address one another with this sort of practical attitude, they engage in what Habermas calls "communicative action", which he distinguishes from strategic forms of social action. [...] In strategic action, actors are not so much interested in mutual understanding as in achieving the individual goals they each bring to the situation.' See James Bohman and William Rehg, 'Jürgen Habermas', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2014) <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/habermas/>> [accessed 16 February 2017].

⁵⁶ In particular, those of Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733), Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1714-1780), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), and Adam Smith (1723-1790). These theories, significantly, posit a primal dialogue between human beings as the origin of language.

⁵⁷ Butler claims that, like the hero of Godwin's *St Leon* (1799), Frankenstein is 'a selfish intellectual [who] trades domestic happiness and marital love for the chimeras of scientific knowledge, success, and power' (Introduction, *Frankenstein*, p. xv).

America. My food is not that of man; I do not destroy the lamb and the kid, to glut my appetite' (p. 120). He appeals again to what must be presumed are shared Enlightenment principles of opposition to Zeus-like arbitrary power: 'The picture I present to you is peaceful and human, and you must feel that you could deny it only in the wantonness of power and cruelty' (p. 120). Frankenstein argues that the creature's very desire for sociality will lead to his reversion to violence: 'How can you, who long for the love and sympathy of man, persevere in this exile? You will return, [...] and meet with their detestation; your evil passions will be renewed' (p. 120). He calls for the termination of dialogue: 'cease to argue the point, for I cannot consent' (p. 120). The creature draws attention to Frankenstein's irrational breaches of dialogic conduct: 'How inconstant are your feelings! But a moment ago you were moved by my representations, and why do you again harden yourself to my complaints?' (121). He appeals to the Enlightenment principle of sympathy as the source of virtue, with a faith in human benevolence that contrasts with his creator, claiming, '[m]y evil passions will have fled, for I shall meet with sympathy' (p. 121). Further invoking this principle, with striking rationality, he argues, '[h]ow is this? I thought I had moved your compassion, and yet you still refuse to bestow on me the only benefit that can soften my heart and render me harmless' (p. 121). His argument ironically passes judgement on the source of humanity's (and Frankenstein's) evils in their atomised condition:

My vices are the children of a forced solitude that I abhor; and my virtues will necessarily arise when I live in communion with an equal. I shall feel the affections of a sensitive being, and become linked to the chain of existence and events, from which I am now excluded. (p. 121)

There is the suggestion in this passage of a reconciled human existence based on mutuality between equals. Here, the dialogism that repressive Prometheanism annuls appears in that aspiration towards 'communion with an equal'. Frankenstein has forced his creature into sharing Frankenstein's own degraded state of solipsism, and has severed the creature's links to 'the chain of existence and events' that comprise social life (including the process of economic production).

Frankenstein considers the argument, acting out the role of the detached, critical interlocutor proper to formal dialogue, and, for the moment, is won over:

I paused some time to reflect on all he had related, and the various arguments which he had employed. I thought of the promise of virtues which he had displayed on the opening of his existence, and the subsequent blighting of all kindly feeling by the loathing and scorn which his protectors had manifested towards him. His power and

threats were not omitted in my calculations [...]. After a long pause of reflection, I concluded, that the justice due both to him and my fellow-creatures demanded of me that I should comply with his request. (pp. 121-22)

Authentic dialogue rests on the mutual recognition of the participants. As this passage and the exchange discussed above indicate, there is frequent mirroring and displacement of roles between Frankenstein and the creature, suggesting an affinity that Frankenstein ultimately rejects. This mirroring occurs in many places in the novel, destabilising Frankenstein's hierarchical authority and promoting sympathy for the creature. It can also serve to indicate the infectious nature of that pathological, asocial individualism of which Frankenstein is the type. Thus 'Good, Evil, Guilt, and Justice' are unsettled and 'the roles of master and slave' are 'alternating and shifting', claims Baldick, as in Hegel's dialectic of master and slave.⁵⁸ This shifting is a different, though related, kind of dialogism, more akin to the polyphony of Mikhail Bakhtin, where many perspectives are encouraged to coexist.⁵⁹ Thus the monster not only represents humankind denied rights by their creator, Zeus; he also, according to Baldick, acts as Prometheus, bringing the ambivalent tool, or weapon, of fire to the De Lacey family — gathering firewood but then burning down their home (p. 46). McNally associates Promethean fire here with plebeian revolt.⁶⁰ And the creature's final death by fire, as McNally says, is 'inverted Prometheanism'.⁶¹ The Titan's gift of technological power over nature, rather than liberating him, has destroyed him — as the potentially emancipatory forces of capitalism destroy the worker.

In line with the fluidity of roles noted above, Frankenstein also aligns himself with Milton's Satan, declaring, 'like the archangel who aspired to omnipotence, I am chained in an eternal hell' (p. 180). Soon after, Frankenstein dies and the remorseful monster mirrors him in this Satanic, egotistic role, confessing to a like 'frightful selfishness' (p. 188) and even citing Milton's Satan when he says that '[e]vil thenceforth became my good' (p. 188). Earlier, he had admonished his creator for banishing him from the utopian 'joy' and 'bliss' he is entitled to: 'I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel' (p. 77). Thus Frankenstein's actions have condemned his creature into mirroring his own variety of Prometheanism, cutting him off from social pleasures and quelling his powers and agency.

⁵⁸ Baldick, p. 44. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁵⁹ This polyphony, for Bakhtin, is characteristic of the novel as a genre and is not unrelated to the novel's multigeneric nature. See M. M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), pp. 259-422.

⁶⁰ McNally, pp. 103-04.

⁶¹ McNally, p. 106.

Recall that Satan is Percy Shelley's incomplete, distorted Prometheus, tainted by 'ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement'.⁶²

In a further mirroring, Walton's monomania reflects that of Frankenstein, as does his rhetoric of individualistic heroism. Like Frankenstein, he seeks mutuality and dialogue, even as his commitment to individualism undermines it. For both, their voyage of discovery is also a search for sociality and intellectual reciprocity; Walton seeks a soul-mate just as Frankenstein (and also the monster) does, asserting, 'I greatly need a friend who would have sense enough not to despise me as a romantic, and affection enough for me to endeavour to regulate my mind' (p. 9). Butler draws attention to Frankenstein's masculine individualism and solipsism. As she says, by Volume III, 'we now see Frankenstein's viewpoint for what it is, not representative of humanity in any neutral, still less noble way, but typically insensitive and self-absorbed'.⁶³ She compares him to Godwinian characters such as Falkland and St Leon, where 'secrecy itself symbolises the greed and competitiveness which for Rousseau was the crime of civilised life'.⁶⁴ Frankenstein 'stands for male arrogance and the impulse to dominate, as this trait is observable domestically'.⁶⁵ The tragic note of the novel is the antagonism between this Promethean drive (in its destructive aspect) and the longing for sociality, where even those who dominate and command creative energies suffer from the alienating effects of those energies.

Instrumental Romance

A generic hybrid, *Frankenstein* incorporates the romance quest (in a gothic variant) and anticipates the adventure novels of the later nineteenth century, such as those of H. Rider Haggard. Walton tries to communicate something of the utopian wonder of discovery to his sister in their epistolary dialogue: 'Inspired by this wind of promise, my day dreams have become more fervent and vivid. I try in vain to be persuaded that the pole is the seat of frost and desolation; it ever presents itself to my imagination as the region of beauty and delights' (p. 5). Angela Wright points out that 'both Walton the explorer and Victor Frankenstein are avid readers of romance and adventure themselves, and it is their reading matter that sparks their Promethean ambitions'.⁶⁶ She says further that Mary Shelley sought 'to strike a critical

⁶² P. B. Shelley, Preface, *Prometheus Unbound*, in *Works*, p. 230.

⁶³ Butler, Introduction, *Frankenstein*, p. xl.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. xli.

⁶⁶ Angela Wright, 'The Gothic', in *The Cambridge Companion to Women's Writing in the Romantic Period*, ed. by Devoney Looser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 58-72 (p. 70).

balance between the “love for the marvellous” with “the common pathways of man”⁶⁷ I would add that it is perhaps a critical dialectic rather than a balance; Shelley’s novel dramatises the desire for marvels that is one aspect of the Promethean urge, but places it in conflict with ordinary human existence. Shelley’s version of gothic adumbrates ways of redirecting the energies fired by that Promethean ignition.

There is, too, the double-edged nature of science, which may have a social utility beyond individual gratification. Walton is not necessarily in bad faith here: ‘You cannot contest the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind [...] by discerning a passage near the pole to those countries [...] or by ascertaining the secret of the magnet’ (p. 6). And even Frankenstein’s scientific explorations may have a similarly humanitarian and progressive component before their goal becomes distorted. But even Frankenstein’s attempt at expiation through pursuing his creature in order to remove the threat to humankind is compromised by his egotism. For his Promethean rhetoric, though laden with utopian promise, is undemocratic, employed strategically to subvert the consensual voices of the near-mutinous crew of Walton’s ship, who want to turn around and abandon the quest. ‘Even the sailors’, Walton tells his sister, ‘feel the power of his eloquence: when he speaks, they no longer despair; he rouses their energies, and, while they hear his voice, they believe these vast mountains of ice are mole-hills, which will vanish before the resolutions of man’ (p. 181).

The sailors make ‘a demand, which, in justice, [Walton] could not refuse’ (p. 182), echoing the creature’s own rational demands to his maker. But Frankenstein addresses the sailors ‘full of lofty design and heroism’ (p. 183), which, here, are manifestations of a distorted, instrumental Prometheanism. The episode is ambivalent, though: the revolt of the sailors means that Walton loses his ‘hopes of utility and glory’ (p. 184) — and remember, those hopes, at the beginning, have promised benefits (‘utility’) to humanity. Frankenstein’s final admonition to Walton captures that ambivalence in motion, and enacts the restless dialectical contradictions of the Promethean urge for discovery: ‘Seek happiness in tranquillity, and avoid ambition, even if it be the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed’ (p. 186).

In summary, rather than exposing the hubris of Enlightenment science, *Frankenstein* reveals impediments to social and scientific emancipation, and it carries out that critique by picturing as its protagonist the flawed, divided Prometheus of Marcuse’s reimagining of the

⁶⁷ Wright, p. 71.

Titan. Frankenstein's creature is coerced into the same pathological, distorted individualism, barred from mutuality, dialogue, and agency in the production of knowledge. Thus asociality reproduces and perpetuates itself. If the monster is the proletariat (as Moretti claims), then the workers, too, are divided amongst themselves and expelled from the possibility of an authentic, truly human social life. But the creature, conceived in a year of darkness illuminated by dialogue, is also an index of the liberating potential of dark, shapeless matter transformed through marvellous human knowledge and imagination, yet constrained by an oppressive, asocial individualism.