

# The Monster Modeled on Milton's Adam

Christopher Small

In 1667, the great English poet John Milton (1608–1674) published his masterpiece, the epic poem *Paradise Lost*. Its sweeping verses told the timeless tale of how Satan got Adam and Eve to commit the first sin, a transgression for which God expelled them from the Garden of Eden. In writing *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley recognized that the man Victor Frankenstein creates has much in common with Milton's Adam, both innocent beings who wake up in a strange world they do not understand and must learn to survive and cope by trial and error. Thus, it is no accident that Shelley's Monster, in attempting to educate himself, reads Milton's *Paradise Lost* and recognizes in Adam's situation and predicaments several similarities to his own. This intriguing essay exploring those similarities is from *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein: Tracing the Myth*, by noted literary editor and drama critic Christopher Small.

The epigraph to the original edition of *Frankenstein* was taken from Book X of *Paradise Lost*; Adam's expostulation to God:

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

## **NO MAKER TO INSTRUCT HIM**

The Monster is thus identified from the start, it seems, with Milton's Adam, a bad copy of the first man—although, as Frankenstein says, he, like God, “had selected his features as beautiful”. The result is quite different, but clearly related to the original: instead of “fair large Front and Eye sublime”, the Monster's “yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles

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and arteries beneath"; his hair, "of a lustrous black, and flowing", might be like Adam's "lyacinthine locks", his teeth "of a pearly whiteness" but "these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes . . . his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips". The same distorted equivalence continues when the Monster, in his glacier meeting with Frankenstein, gives like Adam an account of his first awakening: apologising in advance and in almost exactly the same terms, for the uncertainty of his memory: "It is with considerable difficulty that I remember the original era of my being: all the events of that period appear confused and indistinct." (As Adam explains to Raphael, "For Man to tell how human Life began/ Is hard; for who himself beginning knew?")

But instead of coming to life in the unsullied environment of Eden, where "all things smiled", the Monster wakes in a charnel-house and finds even his first sensations painful, the darkness troubling, the light oppressive, hunger and thirst a torment. The world into which he wanders, though it affords some of the same facilities as Paradise ("I ate some berries which I found hanging on the trees, or lying on the ground. I slaked my thirst at the brook") is for the most part unpleasant and bewildering. Without his maker to instruct him as God instructs Adam he understands nothing and, a crucial difference, has no God-given language. In Adam's case, though "who I was, or where, or from what cause" he does not know, he has only to attempt speech "and forthwith spake", naming everything in sight. In the Monster's, Frankenstein has already described his apparition at the bedside, how he could only mutter "inarticulate sounds", although trying to communicate. He does not know the name of anything, and can hardly be said to think ("No distinct ideas occupied my mind; all was confused"). When he comes in contact for any length of time with human beings (the family in the cottage next to which he hides himself) he doesn't know what they are saying and has to teach himself language by careful listening; with the fortunate circumstance, it is true, that one of the cottagers is herself learning from another. The whole cottage episode is in fact inserted in order that the Monster should learn speech, letters, and the rudiments of human culture *without being taught*, either by a human or a divine agency: nothing, and it is essential to the story that it should so be, is allowed to break his isolation.

### TAPPING THE INNATE HUMAN POTENTIAL

Much of this business is simply in accordance with the principle already mentioned, that events however extraordinary should have a "natural" explanation. But Mary's adherence to this rule was less the negative one, of excluding "supernatural" mechanisms by no matter what improbabilities, than the positive one of "delineating . . . human passions", as Shelley said, according to "the elementary principles of human nature". It was necessary for her plot that the Monster should learn to speak and read; but it was necessary much more fundamentally for her purpose that he should do so without a teacher.

One can see at work here the speculation, much indulged in by men of Enlightenment, what would be the effects upon a human being of complete severance from human society from infancy: would a child thus cut off learn to talk at all, would he speak . . . the "language of our first parents", what would his behaviour be? Mary's Monster, though, full-grown—or rather a ready-made adult—is in the situation of [a] child, and her answer is the reasonable one, that child or man so deprived of the normal means of learning will be quite inarticulate. But the Monster's education also demonstrates (and here Mary showed her grasp of processes and capabilities which modern learning theory is only now returning to recognise) that even without any of the ordinary, and necessary circumstances of "socialisation", a human being, born or made, has innate potentialities that allow him to make use of them far beyond mechanically rational expectation. The Monster cannot learn speech without hearing others speak, he cannot read without at least indirect instruction, but he has a "natural" aptitude, even though an artificial creature, which enables him to pick up these human accomplishments with extraordinary rapidity. Thought, one may say, was already present in him, though confused, and logical deduction (learning about fire) was possible for him before language, which expresses but does not originate it, was available to him. The Monster's feats of learning are extraordinary, or far-fetched; but seem less so to anyone who seriously thinks (as Mary may well have thought, watching her baby son exploring and learning about his world) what it is for an infant to learn speech, not as one may acquire another language, but as an absolute beginner.

### AN UGLY DUCKLING WITH A HEART

The Monster, however ill-made, has the potentialities of a child, though starting off, like Adam, fully-grown; and one of Mary's more obvious aims was to show, in accordance with quite un-Miltonic views . . . that an Adam without any of the advantages of the original, and without direct inspiration from God or anywhere else except his own nature, was nevertheless capable of happiness and virtue. Though a monstrosity . . . he has an inbuilt affinity with the natural world: even in his wholly unenlightened state, knowing nothing of himself or his surroundings, he feels pleasure at the sight of the rising moon, though he doesn't know what it is; he listens, again with pleasure, to the song of the birds; and he is immediately attracted by the first human beings he sees, though rejected by them.

Like the ethologist's duckling he is primed for attachment; but being a conspicuously Ugly Duckling is spurned from the beginning. His longing for society and "sympathy" and his deprivation of them are main themes of the story, of which more will be said. The point at the moment is the Monster's potentiality as a new, completely uninstructed being who not only shows remarkable resource and intelligence, but has a "feeling heart". He responds at once to the music played by the inhabitants of the cottage, and to the spectacle of their mutual affection; the girl listening to her father was, he says, "a lovely sight, even to me, poor wretch! who had never beheld aught beautiful before", and the emotion they show powerfully affects him. The girl weeps and the father smiles on her and comforts her, whereupon the Monster watching from his hiding place feels "sensations of a peculiar and overpowering nature: they were a mixture of pain and pleasure, such as I had never before experienced, either from hunger or cold, warmth or food".

He feels them moreover before he can put words to them; it is only later, after learning a collection of nouns and proper names, that he begins to grasp at abstractions: "I distinguished several other words, without being able as yet to understand or apply them; such as *good*, *dearest*, *unhappy*." He grows, though still in hiding, to "love and reverence" his "protectors", as, pathetically, "in an innocent, half-painful self-deceit", he likes to call them. He is like a lonely child creating an ideal fantasy-family for himself; alternatively, he

is in the happy state of pre-lapsarian [before having sinned] Adam: "My spirits were elevated by the enchanting appearance of nature; the past was blotted from my memory, the present was tranquil, and the future gilded by bright rays of hope and anticipation of joy."

### "MISERY MADE ME A FIEND"

What goes wrong? Superficially, of course, it is simply a matter of bad luck and misunderstanding. The Monster schemes to ingratiate himself with the cottagers by speaking first to the old man who, as well as being gentle and benevolent, is blind and therefore won't know him as a monster. But just when he is about to reveal his identity and throw himself on the old man's mercy, the others return, think that he is attacking their father, and drive him out; shortly afterwards, in fear and disgust they leave the place and the Monster never sees them again. From this time things go from bad to worse for him, he is rejected on all sides, fled from, shot at, and so he becomes by degrees what the others have taken him for, a malignant outcast.

"I was benevolent and good," he says to Frankenstein on the glacier; "misery made me a fiend. Make me happy and I shall again be virtuous." The same . . . formula appears at other points, and was naturally singled out by Shelley himself as the chief moral of the story: the crimes of the Monster, he said in his first appreciation of the book, were not due to "any unaccountable propensity to evil, but flow irresistibly from certain causes fully adequate to their production . . . Treat a person ill and he will become wicked." Shelley did not inquire why it should be necessary to invent a Monster to demonstrate this—"perhaps the most important and of the most universal application of any moral that can be enforced by example"—nor what the implications were for the character of those who so ill-treated him. . . . He was disinclined to push his analysis so far. For the interdependence of virtue and happiness are only a small part of the moral structure of Frankenstein, which deals in uncertainties much more difficult to resolve than any to be found in [the writings of Mary's father, William] Godwin or, for that matter, in Milton.

### THE MONSTER-SATAN

It has already been seen how the Monster, reading *Paradise Lost* and discovering parallels, likens himself not only to

Adam but to Satan: a little later he reverts to this when he finds out that Frankenstein himself had found his own handiwork not, as God did, good, but revolting. "Accursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust? God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance. Satan had his companions, fellow-devils, to admire and encourage him; but I am solitary and abhorred." The Monster is worse off than Adam, exiled from the start, and he is also a Satan, but more wretched than Milton's, who not only had his hellish host to support him, described by Milton in such grandiose terms, but was conscious also of belonging in some way, even though a rebel, within God's universe. The Monster belongs nowhere and to nobody. As the story progresses so he becomes progressively more Satanic, his powers growing to positively fiendish capacity (he is alluded to more often as "the Fiend" in the later part of the book) and his ill deeds multiplying accordingly, but also taking on some of the Luciferian majesty so striking in Milton's Satan. In his second confrontation with Frankenstein, in Orkney, he addresses him as "slave"—"You are my creator, but I am your master", and threatens him: "Beware; for I am fearless, and therefore powerful. I will watch with the wiliness of a snake, that I may sting with its venom." Not surprisingly, Frankenstein in reply calls him simply "Devil".

And at the end, Monster-Adam has become quite explicitly Monster-Satan. He speaks of his last murder and act of revenge, and says, "then I was not miserable. I had cast off all feeling, subdued all anguish, to riot in the excess of my despair. Evil henceforth became my good." ("So farewell Hope, and with Hope farewell Fear, / Farewell Remorse: all Good to me is lost; / Evil be thou my Good," says Milton's Satan.) The Monster is now exactly like Satan remembering his once angelic status, but unable to comprehend it: "I cannot believe," he says, "that I am the same creature whose thoughts were once filled with sublime and transcendent visions of the beauty and majesty of goodness. But it is even so: the fallen angel becomes a malignant devil."