FACING THE UGLY: THE CASE OF FRANKENSTEIN

BY DENISE GIGANTE

He approached; his countenance bespoke bitter anguish, combined with disdain and malignity, while its unearthly ugliness rendered it almost too horrible for human eyes.¹

—Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Frankenstein

I. THE VIA NEGATIVA OF UGLINESS

Whatever else can—and has—been said about Victor Frankenstein’s monster, one thing cannot be denied: the creature is exceedingly ugly. But in what does this ugliness consist? Such a question is deceptively simple; any recourse to aesthetic theory is bound to come up empty. Traditional categories from the eighteenth century—the sublime, the beautiful, the picturesque—exclude the ugly, and though the grotesque (particularly prominent later in the nineteenth century) may at first seem related, it is never specifically invoked in Frankenstein and must not be confused with the ugly. While the etymological heritage of the grotesque combines both the comic and the horrific, the ugly lacks comic effect.² In fact, aesthetically speaking, the ugly simply lacks. If it is mentioned at all, it is treated as a negative form of the beautiful: either as a lack of beauty in general or as a gap in the beautiful object.³ Hume, for example, speaks of “defects” or “blemishes” in the beautiful object in his essay “Of the Standard of Taste” (1757).⁴ Because the ugly is assumed to be everything the beautiful is not, it emerges as a mere tautology. In A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757), Burke sums up the Enlightenment point of view: “It may appear like a sort of repetition . . . to insist here upon the nature of Ugliness.”⁵ Although Burke’s binary of the sublime and the beautiful does not assert an antithesis between these two aesthetic modes, it adopts a bifurcated approach that Kant will later take up in The Critique of Judgement (1790).⁶ For while Kant’s third Critique transforms Burke’s empiricist aesthetics substantially, it does not deviate from his basic assumption about the ugly, that it is a shadow form of the beautiful, its silent, invisible partner.
This *via negativa* of aesthetic theory, however, will not suffice as a hermeneutic mode to account for the positive ugliness of Mary Shelley’s Creature. If the ugly object lacks beauty, the Creature, as the aesthetic object of Frankenstein’s “unhallowed arts” (1831; *F*, 339), functions more actively than lack. He not only fails to please, he emphatically displeases. And in his relation to the subject, Victor Frankenstein, he manifests precisely the opposite of lack: excess. In a recent psychological foray into the uncharted field of the ugly, Mark Cousins proposes a model of ugliness as excess, which Slavoj Žižek develops in his discussion of “Ugly *Jouissance*” and which will be useful to us here:

Contrary to the standard idealist argument that conceives ugliness as the defective mode of beauty, as its distortion, one should assert the *ontological primacy of ugliness*: it is beauty that is a kind of defense against the Ugly in its repulsive existence—or, rather, against existence *tout court*, since . . . what is ugly is ultimately the brutal fact of existence (of the real) as such.7

Unlike the ghostly figments populating the *Fantasmagoriana* which Shelley originally set out to emulate on the shores of Lake Leman, Frankenstein’s Creature is only *too* real. He is, like the blood and guts oozing from the fissures in his skin, an excess of existence, exceeding representation, and hence appearing to others as a chaotic spillage from his own representational shell.8 While this portrayal might seem analogous to that of the Kantian sublime object, in which the representation of the thing [*Vorstellung*] in empirical form can never adequately present the Thing itself [*Ding an sich*], we must be careful to distinguish the ugly from the sublime object in order to explore a category not sufficiently accounted for by aesthetic discourse. For as this essay will show, ugliness in *Frankenstein* is less of an aesthetic experience than a question of survival.

Regardless of how we choose to map Victor Frankenstein onto his socio-historical grid, his subject position is radically threatened by the intrusive reality of his Creature. It is important to remember that the Creature’s ugliness did not bother Victor (or anyone else for that matter) before he came to life: “he was ugly then; but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion . . .” (*F*, 87). As we shall see, he insists on himself, on the very stuff of his existence, which Victor’s socially (in Lacanian terms, symbolically) constructed identity must, by definition, repress. Although one might point to Victor’s difficulty in laying his hands on the Creature toward the end of the novel as evidence to the contrary, that is, as evidence of the Creature’s insubstantiality, that
difficulty has more to do with Victor's failure to get in touch with his own existence (the "real" Victor) than with any lack of materiality on the part of the Creature himself. Once we confront him, as Victor does, in the raw ugliness of his own existence, we discover that he symbolizes nothing but the unsymbolized: the repressed ugliness at the heart of an elaborate symbolic network that is threatened the moment he bursts on the scene, exposing to view his radically unscribed existence.

If we are to employ the Freudian vocabulary of repression, however, we must be careful to distinguish the ugly from the uncanny [unheimlich] object, which Freud discusses in similar terms as "everything that ought to have remained . . . hidden and secret and has become visible," and which thus constitutes a return of the repressed in the subject. Like the ugly, the uncanny occupies a "remote region" of aesthetics that has been theoretically neglected:

The subject of the "uncanny" . . . undoubtedly belongs to all that is terrible—to all that arouses dread and creeping horror; it is equally certain, too, that the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with whatever excites dread. Yet we may expect that it implies some intrinsic quality which justifies the use of a special name. One is curious to know what this peculiar quality is which allows us to distinguish as "uncanny" certain things within the boundaries of what is "fearful."11

Both the uncanny and the ugly fall under the rubric of the fearful; the crucial distinction between them is that while something may be uncanny for one person and yet not so for another, the ugly is universally offensive. The uncanny finds its being in whatever object serves to trigger an intrusion of repressed childhood complexes into the mind of the subject; hence nothing is intrinsically uncanny. The Creature's ugliness, on the other hand, constitutes a return of the repressed not linked to any particular childhood fixation. Instead the Creature appears as a return of what is universally repressed, or what Freud's precursor, F. W. J. Schelling, considers the horror at the core of all existence. Our concern, consequently, is not with the specific subject of psychoanalysis so much as with ugliness itself. The task will be to discover how Shelley extracts the Creature from the crack opened up by the ugly in eighteenth-century aesthetic theory in order to posit him as that aesthetic impossibility: the positive manifestation of ugliness.

Much critical debate surrounding Frankenstein has focused on the discourse of political monstrosity and how it relates to Victor's "miserable monster" (F, 87). Fred Botting, for example, surveys the context of

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political monstrosity from Hobbes to Burke and concludes that monstrosity represents “a complex and changing resistance to established authority.”12 Like the monstrous, the ugly resists, but what it resists is not established authority so much as the aestheticization that enables that very authority. Accordingly, this essay shall address not monstrosity per se so much as the ugliness that precedes and predetermines that monstrosity. Indeed I must agree with Harold Bloom that “a beautiful ‘monster,’ even a passable one, would not have been a ‘monster.'”13 But what is it about the ugly that aesthetic theory cannot face and that inevitably translates into the socio-political discourse of monstrosity?

In his Reflections on the Revolution in France, Burke maintains the need for “pleasing illusions” and “superadded ideas” to beautify or “cover the defects of our naked shivering nature.”14 Mandeville states the case more plainly earlier in the century when he writes that “all Men endeavour to hide themselves, their Ugly Nakedness, from each other . . . wrapping up the true Motives of their Hearts in the Specious Cloke of Sociableness.”15 As Victor’s experience during the 1790s (when the novel is set) demonstrates, direct exposure of the raw, unaestheticized stuff of humanity (its “Ugly Nakedness”) threatens not only the subject itself, but the entire system of symbolic representation, the disruption of which would constitute the “horrible and disgustful situation” (R, 90) that Burke describes as monstrous:

> Everything seems out of nature in this strange chaos of levity and ferocity, and of all sorts of crimes jumbled together with all sorts of follies. In viewing this monstrous tragicomic scene, the most opposite passions necessarily succeed and sometimes mix with each other in the mind. (R, 11; my emphasis)

What Burke fears is the irruption of the repressed social real through the skin of “pleasing illusions” that contain—and sustain—society. Any fissures in the “system of manners” become infections, “mental blotches and running sores” that inevitably infect the social body with the “contagion of their ill example” (R, 88, 116). Significantly, these particular “running sores” spring from the aristocracy, the luxurious if “miserable great” (R, 116), for it is not only the lower orders that constitute a threat to society: it is whatever threatens to disrupt order as such, to undo those very distinctions.16

Cousins draws upon this notion of “contagion,” proposing that the ugly object appears as “an invasive contaminating life stripped of all signification,” one that “gorges on meaning” as it engulfs the subject
with its own lack of meaning, its excessive incoherence. In fact, in Frankenstein, the term “ugly” emerges at the precise point when the speaking subject is about to be consumed by such incoherence. Descending the Mer de Glace after a traumatic encounter with the Creature, for example, Victor describes the wind “as if it were a dull ugly siroco on its way to consume [him]” (F, 176). While the sirocco is as invisible as wind and hence cannot, strictly speaking, qualify as ugly, his pathetic fallacy is apt. For as the “contaminating life” of the Creature spills out from his overstretched skin to pursue Victor physically and psychologically, it threatens to “consume” him and the entire symbolic order in which he is implicated. Thus while it is couched in admittedly boyish terms, William Frankenstein’s fatal encounter with the Creature—“monster! ugly wretch! you wish to eat me, and tear me to pieces” (F, 169)—contains a fundamental insight into the nature of ugliness itself: the ugly is that which threatens to consume and disorder the subject. William cries, “Let me go, or I will tell my papa” (F, 169), and it is appropriate that his defense should be a psychological appeal to the Name of the Father, the site of symbolic authority that guarantees the young Frankenstein his ground of meaning in the face of consuming chaos. That the Creature is ready to gorge on that meaning we may infer from his desperate plea, “Child, what is the meaning of this?” (F, 169), which he utters as he draws the boy forcibly toward him, wrenching his hands away from his eyes. Like the aesthetic category of the ugly itself, the Creature cannot be faced.

II. THE BURKEAN ANTI-DEFINITION

Since our purpose, however, is to face the ugly, not as inversion or lack but as positive fact, we must first develop it in the darkroom of late eighteenth-century aesthetic theory. Burke’s definition of ugliness is brief and divides into three parts. The first states negatively that the ugly is that which the beautiful is not: “I imagine [ugliness] to be in all respects the opposite to those qualities which we have laid down for the constituents of beauty” (E, 119). To consider the Creature according to Burkean aesthetics, therefore, we must view him in reverse through the lens of the beautiful as the aesthetic object of Victor’s artistic fashioning. Indeed Victor prefers to regard himself not as a scientist so much as “an artist occupied by his favourite employment” (F, 85), selecting disparate parts for their beauty rather than choosing an entire body to reanimate. In a passage reminiscent of Mary Shelley’s original “reverie” (1831; F, 364), in which she first envisioned the Creature, he describes the scene of creation:

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... by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs.

How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful!—Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips. (F, 85-86)

Victor's description takes the form of what might be called an "anti-blazon," whereby individual features, such as the Creature's hair "of a lustrous black, and flowing" and "his teeth of a pearly whiteness," are sutured together with other unsightly features (his "work of muscles and arteries," his "straight black lips") that radically disrupt aesthetic representation. As cracks and fissures emerge in the representation, the visceral reality of the Creature leaks through to destroy all fantasy. Despite the fact that Victor specifically chose each feature for its beauty ("I had selected his features as beautiful"), the combined form cannot aesthetically contain its own existence.

Here Victor's creative method resembles that which Mary Wollstonecraft ascribes to the sculptors of Greek antiquity: "beautiful limbs and features were selected from various bodies to form an harmonious whole . . . It was not, however, the mechanical selection of limbs and features; but the ebullition of an heated fancy that burst forth." While in the case of the Greek statue, the sculptor's "heated fancy" manages to contain the hodgepodge of individually selected limbs and features, Victor "went to it in cold blood" (F, 191). As a result, what "burst forth" was not his vision so much as the brute fact of the Creature himself. Coleridge would have condemned this "mechanical selection of limbs and features" as a "mechanical art," one inherently unable to transform the artist's materials into a harmonious whole.

Following Francis Hutcheson, who earlier in the eighteenth century had asserted "the universal Agreement of Mankind in their sense of Beauty from Uniformity amidst variety," Coleridge defined beauty as "multiëty in Unity." "The BEAUTIFUL," he writes, "is that in which the many, still seen as many, becomes one." If the Creature is not to be seen as a mere mechanistic collection of limbs, he must inspire his viewer with the imaginative power necessary to unite his various anatomical components into the totality of a human being. Otherwise,
like the “mechanistic philosophy” that Burke complains would “confound all sorts of citizens . . . into one homogenous mass” (*R*, 216), the creation of an individual from anatomical parts, or a social body from parts that are themselves individuals, can be a futile—if not perilous—endeavor.22

What immediately disrupts Victor's imaginative effort to unite his Creature's various components into a single totality is the “dull yellow eye of the creature.” It dominates his thoughts, doubling from a single “yellow eye” to two “watery eyes” as he struggles to contain it in representation.23 He notices with disgust how the eyeballs are lost in the murkiness, the “dun white” of their surrounding sockets, and he even doubts “if eyes they may be called” (*F*, 87). Yellow, watery, and dun, the Creature's eyes are antithetical to the beautiful eye that Burke claims has “so great a share in the beauty of the animal creation” (*E*, 118). In the section directly before “UGLINESS,” entitled “The EYE,” he writes:

I think then, that the beauty of the eye consists, first, in its *clearness*; . . . none are pleased with an eye, whose water (to use that term) is dull and muddy. We are pleased with the eye in this view, on the principle upon which we like diamonds, clear water, glass, and such like transparent substances. (*E*, 118)

By focusing on the ideal of transparency, Burke draws attention away from the materiality of the eye itself. While a clear eye serves as a proverbial window into the soul, the Creature's eye is little more than a reminder of its own existence: a lump of vile jelly attached to the skull. With reference to the “depthless eyes” of Shelley's Creature, Žižek writes: “The nontransparent, 'depthless' eye blocks out our access to the 'soul,' to the infinite abyss of the 'person,' thus turning it into a soulless monster: not simply a nonsubjective machine, but rather an uncanny subject that has not yet been submitted to the process of 'subjectivization' which confers upon it the depth of 'personality.'”24 Leaving aside for a moment Žižek's use of the word “uncanny,” his insight is grounded in the Burkean aesthetic theory that serves as context for *Frankenstein*.

As a mere reminder of its own existence, the Creature's “depthless” eye serves as the prototype for various hideous progeny, including the “dead grey eye” of Polidori's vampire, another creature to emerge from the same evening at Villa Diodati:

... some attributed [their fear] to the dead grey eye, which, fixing upon the object's face, did not seem to penetrate, and at one glance to pierce through to the inward workings of the heart; but fell upon the cheek with a leaden ray that weighed upon the skin it could not pass.25
If the vampire is opposite to the Creature in that he constitutes an excess of representation over existence, his eye is also opposite to the Creature's eye. While the latter prevents the viewer from penetrating through to the Creature's soul, the vampire's "dead grey eye" cannot penetrate through to the "heart" or soul of his viewer. Both eyes are monstrous, and may be considered opposite sides of the same coin: a facial blob that blocks or clogs imaginative representation. Viewed in these terms, Milton's insistence that despite his blindness his eyes had remained "as clear and bright, without a cloud, as the eyes of men who see most keenly" may indicate more than aesthetic vanity.26 What is at stake is his subjectivity as such, a transcendence over his own physical existence in the eyes of the world. Thus the invocation (rather, lamentation) to the "heav'ly Muse" in the third book of Paradise Lost—"these eyes, that roll in vain / To find thy piercing ray, and find no dawn; / So thick a drop serene has quencht thir Orbs"—makes a point of referring to his blindness as one that has not clouded his eyes (the "drop serene" being the Latin medical term for blindness that does not affect the appearance of the eye).27 Elsewhere this point becomes central to Milton's defense against the charge of being "A monster, dreadful, ugly, huge, deprived of sight."28

Unlike the "dull yellow" or "dead grey" eye, the beautiful eye diverts attention from the substance of the eye itself. Burke writes that "the eye affects, as it is expressive of some qualities of the mind, and its principal power generally arises from this" (E, 118-19). In direct contrast to the Creature's ugly eye, therefore, stands Victor's description of the "fair" Elizabeth: "Her brow was clear and... her blue eyes cloudless... none could behold her without looking on her as of a distinct species, a being heaven-sent, and bearing a celestial stamp in all her features" (1831; F, 323).29 Victor's fantasy takes possession of him here and suggests a three-dimensionality of the human being, rather than of the brow or the eye itself. As a result, the mere fact of her head, the physical stuff of it, is repressed. Indeed his representation contains her materiality to such a degree that she becomes completely etherealized: she is "heaven-sent" and bears a celestial "stamp." Whereas the " unearthly creature" is classed beneath the "superior beauty of man" (F, 192), Elizabeth is elevated above it as "a distinct species"—presumably one unencumbered by those "real" bodily functions that Wollstonecraft for one considered "so very disgusting."30 Like the fair Elizabeth the "wondrously fair" Safie exhibits an "animated eye" and "countenance of angelic beauty and expression" (F, 144). While an animated eye conveys the animating mind behind, a static eye only increases the chance that
the viewer’s gaze will come to light on the horrific substance of the eye itself. As Burke observes, “the motion of the eye contributes to its beauty, by continually shifting its direction” (E, 118). One look in the “dull yellow” eye of the Creature is enough to reveal the horror of his full-blown existence and demolish all “pleasing illusions.”

In addition to the transparent eye, Burke considers smoothness to be a “very considerable part of the effect of beauty . . . indeed the most considerable” (E, 114). He argues that if we “take any beautiful object, and give it a broken and rugged surface . . . however well formed it may be in other respects, it pleases no longer” (E, 114). Cousins and Žižek both implicitly follow Burke in emphasizing the “broken” surface as a contributing effect of the ugly: “The shock of ugliness occurs when the surface is actually cut, opened up, so that the direct insight into the actual depth of the skinless flesh dispels the spiritual, immaterial pseudodepth.”31 In this sense, Victor’s observation that the Creature’s “yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath” may be seen as metonymic for his ugliness in general. While a smooth skin provides an imaginary screen for the subject to project his or her fantasy of the transcendent human being inside the object of perception, the “shrivelled complexion” of Frankenstein’s Creature radically disrupts any effort to elevate him above the “filthy mass” (F, 174) of his flesh.32

In Gulliver’s Travels (1726), another one of the many books Mary Shelley was reading during the genesis of Frankenstein, Swift illustrates a similar phenomenon. When Lemuel Gulliver views the enormous, naked bodies of the women of Brobdingnag, their skin is magnified to such giant proportions that it loses its ability to function as a fantasmatic screen: it is too close and insists on its own reality.33 As the real, subcutaneous existence of the women bursts traumatically through Gulliver’s fantasy of them, they strike him as terribly ugly:

they would strip themselves to the Skin . . . their naked Bodies; which, I am sure, to me was very far from being a tempting Sight, or from giving me any other Motions than those of Horror and Disgust. Their Skins appeared so coarse and uneven, so variously coloured when I saw them near, with a Mole here and there as broad as a Trencher, and Hairs hanging from it thicker than Pack-threads; to say nothing further concerning the rest of their Persons.34

The hairs protruding through the skin of the Brobdingnagian women, like the veins and arteries protruding through the skin of the Creature, reach out to Gulliver as tentacles from an alien (because repressed)

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zone of existence and choke him with disgust.\textsuperscript{35} The reality of their naked bodies serves as a foil to the etherealized Elizabeth, whose skin displays no cutaneous incoherence but is completely of a piece. While the “celestial stamp” on all her features testifies to her wholeness as a created product, the Creature’s skin struggles unsuccessfully to conceal the raw physicality of his gigantic (though not quite Brobdingnagian) stature. The stitches we can only assume are holding him together (a visual image impressed upon us by screen versions of \textit{Frankenstein}) expose the mechanics of his creation and produce an effect opposite to that of Elizabeth’s mystified “stamp.”

In the second part of his (anti-)definition of the ugly, Burke states that “though ugliness be the opposite to beauty, it is not the opposite to proportion and fitness. For it is possible that a thing may be very ugly with any proportions, and with a perfect fitness to any uses” (\textit{E}, 119). Certainly, the Creature is not “opposite to proportion.” Despite the fact that Victor’s eyes “start[ed] from their sockets” at the sight of him, Victor makes clear that the Creature’s “limbs were in proportion” and that, in accordance with his eight-foot stature, his figure was designed “proportionally large” (\textit{F}, 82-86). As Burke explains, it is not ugliness but “deformity” that is opposed to proportion: “\textit{Deformity} is opposed . . . to the \textit{compleat, common form}” (\textit{E}, 102; emphasis in the original). One must keep in mind that Burke is working from an aesthetic tradition that he feels has been unsystematic in its use of terms and inexact in mapping the terrain of the non-beautiful. Even the Creature refers to the “deformity of [his] figure,” despite the fact that, though large, he is not technically deformed (\textit{F}, 141). When he sees himself in a transparent pool for the first time, he laments “the fatal effects of this miserable deformity” (\textit{F}, 142). Yet as his creator seems to know better than himself, deformity is a distinct category not to be confused (literally, fused together) with the ugly.

If the Creature is not “opposite to proportion,” neither is he opposite to “fitness.” Like the monkey, whom Burke claims may be physically fit and still qualify as ugly, “he is admirabl[y] calculated for running, leaping, grappling, and climbing; and yet there are few animals which seem to have less beauty in the eyes of all mankind” (\textit{E}, 105). The Creature, too, is fit—or \textit{too} fit. His superhuman ability to overcome natural adversity, far from inspiring admiration, horrifies his persecuted maker: “he had followed me in my travels; he had loitered in forests, hid himself in caves, or taken refuge in wide and desert heaths” (\textit{F}, 193). In short, just as the Creature is opposed to those qualities that constitute beauty (a clear eye, beautiful skin, and so forth), he is not opposed to
those qualities (proportion and fitness) that are not opposed to ugliness. (I have allowed the convoluted syntax of the previous sentence to stand in order to emphasize the difficulty of discussing the ugly in terms of aesthetic discourse.)

In the final third of his section on “UGLINESS,” Burke separates the ugly from the sublime: “Ugliness I imagine likewise to be consistent enough with an idea of the sublime. But I would by no means insinuate that ugliness of itself is a sublime idea, unless united with such qualities as excite a strong terror” (E, 119). While the beautiful object is calculated to excite pleasure and the sublime object pain, the paradox is that sublime pain in turn leads to pleasure: “When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be and they are delightful, as we every day experience” (E, 39-40). Although it would be somewhat reductive (and in the terms Burke sets forth, inaccurate) to do so, it can be tempting to read the Creature as an object of sublimity. Burke complains that the monster has consumed all his thoughts and “swallowed up every habit of [his] nature” (F, 84), and such obsession with the object is typical of the sublime. Burke could almost be describing Victor when he writes that in the experience of sublimity “the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it” (E, 57). As Victor himself relates, “The form of the monster on whom I had bestowed existence was for ever before my eyes, and I raved incessantly concerning him” (F, 91). Not only does Victor experience several rounds of the “terror” associated with sublimity, but he takes perverse delight in pursuing his Creature on a homicidal chase to the ends of the earth, the very landscapes identified with the Burkean sublime.

However the principal factor of sublime experience—being elevated from terror to a comprehension of greatness—is absent from Victor’s experience. Instead, he becomes psychologically debased after every encounter with the Creature: a “miserable wretch” (F, 227) like the Creature himself. Instead of attaining an awareness of his subjective capacity, he grows feverish and weak, descending into the chaotic jumble of sensations from which he had originally emerged as a subject. As he loses control over his own existence, he tries fruitlessly to run from it, begging his father, for example: “take me where I may forget myself, my existence” (F, 209). After another particularly feverish night on the Orkney islands, he remarks: “when I awoke, I again felt as if I belonged to a race of human beings like myself” (F, 196). Like his

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young brother William, who seeks refuge in the Name of the Father, Victor seizes upon the symbolic order to make sense of his own ugly existence.

III. THE KANTIAN APORIA

If Burke theorizes the ugly object in reverse, stating methodically what the ugly is not, Kant effectively obliterates it. He swerves from Burke’s empiricist aesthetics by dismissing the “real existence” of the object: “All one wants to know is whether the mere representation of the object is to my liking, no matter how indifferent I may be to the real existence of the object of this representation.”36 As a result, the site of aesthetic experience shifts from the physiological subject, the “work of muscles and arteries” that register sensation, to the subject’s fleshed-out representation of the object. An aesthetic judgment must represent “the accord, in a given intuition, of the faculty of presentation, or the imagination, with the faculty of concepts that belongs to understanding or reason, in the sense of the former assisting the latter” (C, 90; emphasis in the original). With regard to the human figure, for example, the ideal of beauty is related to the idea of good (C, 79-80). If beauty entails the idea of good, and if ugliness is the implied opposite of beauty, then it would seem that the ugly entails the idea of evil.

Such a proposition has a long literary heritage. In Paradise Lost, the term “ugly” first appears with Sin herself, who is described as being “uglier” than the “Night-Hag” (PL, 2.662); later the devils are transformed into “a crowd / Of ugly Serpents” (PL, 10.538-39), and this juxtaposition of “ugly” with the morally repulsive Sin and serpent is reinforced in Adam’s prophetic vision of evil: “O sight / Of terror, foul and ugly to behold” (PL, 11.463-64). In Pamela (1740), to take another example from Shelley’s reading list at this time, Richardson’s heroine protests: “It is impossible I should love him; for his vices all ugly him all over, as I may say.”37 Percy Shelley has the “Spirit of the Earth” describe women as the “ugliest of all things evil, / Though fair” in Prometheus Unbound (1819), and in a Reflector essay several years earlier, Charles Lamb satirizes the long-standing connection: “How ugly a person looks upon whose reputation some awkward aspersions hangs, and how suddenly his countenance clears up with his character.”38 The Creature himself is called a “devil” (F, 104) and a “daemon” (F, 112) before he ever has a chance to speak for himself. Nevertheless, in strictly aesthetic terms, according to Kant this approach will not do. The concept of good must be distilled from the ideal of “pure” beauty since “an estimate formed according to such a standard can never be purely aesthetic” (C,
80). It would follow that the concept of evil must likewise be distilled from the ideal of pure ugliness, but (and one may readily anticipate the problem) while we can distill the good from the ideal of beauty, there is no aesthetic ideal of the ugly from which to distill evil or anything else.

The object finds its being in the realm of the imaginative ideal for Kant, and if there is no ideal of the ugly, in what manner can the ugly object be said to exist? Kant says it does not. He avoids his own theoretical aporia by claiming that the ugliness that cannot be denied in nature must be represented within given aesthetic categories, namely the beautiful or the sublime, for to present the ugly qua ugly would make the viewer turn away in disgust—and hence obviate all aesthetic judgment:

The Furies, diseases, devastations of war, and the like, can (as evils) be very beautifully described, nay even represented in pictures. One kind of ugliness alone is incapable of being represented conformably to nature without destroying all aesthetic delight, and consequently artistic beauty, namely, that which excites disgust. For, as in this strange sensation, which depends purely on the imagination, the object is represented as insisting, as it were, upon our enjoying it, while we still set our face against it . . . (C, 173-74)

What we discern in the passage above is that the ugly is that which disgusts; and it disgusts because it “insists.” Whether we pursue this “insistence” back to its Latin root sistere (to stand still) or the German “insist” [bestehen] to its root, stehen (to stand), we find that what “insists” is that which “stands” in the way. The ugly is offensively obtrusive in standing between the subject and its representation of the object. It stands in for itself, as it were, refusing to budge, and thus stripping the subject of imaginative capacity. Freud argues that reality is that which stands in the way of desire, and in this sense what we find insisting is “real existence” as such. It stands in the way of the subject’s quest for the elusive Ding-an-Sich, the thing the subject can never attain, and thus must incessantly desire, by presenting itself as an unwanted Ding. It obtrudes itself through the noumenal gap in the object, clogging it, and hence closing the subject off from its own imaginative capacity.

While the subject is seeking the phantasmal Ding-an-Sich, in other words, the ugly stands in the way, like Blake’s “opaque blackening fiend,” to turn the subject back on its own opacity. Unlike the ugly, the beautiful object can be imaginatively comprehended. And even the sublime object, though it inspires a representation of limitlessness, can still be comprehended as an object: it causes “a representation of

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limitlessness, yet with a super-added thought of its totality” (C, 90). In both kinds of Kantian sublimity, the dynamic and the mathematical, the mind attains an awareness of its own capacity, its ability to “fit over” sublimity itself with its own “super-added thought.” We may call nature sublime, but what we really mean is that we can contain it, that it is our mind, rather than nature, that expands toward the infinite. But if the sublime object is not truly “limitless,” then, we might posit the ugly, or that which cannot be contained as an object, as a more radical antithesis to the beautiful. For if beauty is a transparency, in the sense that it is nothing distinct from the feeling of the subject, and if ugliness is its radical antithesis, then what emerges is an anti-transparency, an opacity or material abhorrence that leaks through representation to disorder the mind of the subject. We may imagine beauty as a form causing delight, but the ugly stops us in our tracks as something we can’t even imagine.

Since Kantian aesthetics are founded upon the repression of the object by the subject such that the subject can always “fit over,” and thus prove itself more extensive than, the object, that which the subject suddenly fails to contain in representation appears as a traumatic excess—a sudden intrusion of what should not be there. In Kant’s case, that excess is “real existence” as such. In this sense the ugly constitutes a “return of the repressed” more radical than the Unheimlich, for it does not merely threaten to unsettle the subject; it threatens to destroy it [zu Grunde zu richten]. Thus unlike the “creeping horror” that overtakes the Freudian subject of the uncanny, the response to the ugly is immediate. Victor abruptly flees his newborn Creature in “horror and disgust” (F, 86), and the Creature’s first public appearance is proleptic of those that follow: “[The shepherd] turned on hearing a noise; and, perceiving me, shrieked loudly; and, quitting the hut, ran across the fields with a speed of which his debilitated form hardly appeared capable” (F, 133-34). Adorno has suggested that by repressing what Kant calls “real existence” the beautiful object only manages to preserve the fear of it: “Terror itself peers out of the eyes of beauty as the coercion that emanates from form.” His insight may go some way toward explaining why, when “real existence” finally does break out in the mode of the ugly, a violent reaction should be axiomatic.

In his advertisement to his 1809 exhibition, Blake illustrates the typically kneejerk response to the ugly. There the “Ugly Man” appears as one of the three “Antient Britons” who escaped from the last battle of King Arthur against the Romans:
At the sight of the Ugly Man, the warriors exhibit no uncanny “creeping horror” but violently contort their limbs and cry out. Blake explicitly describes him as “one approaching to the beast in features and form, his forehead small, without frontals; his jaws large; . . . and every thing tending toward what is truly Ugly, the incapability of intellect.”42 While the Ugly Man serves Blake’s particular purposes as a figure of Urizenic reason, he is bestial in that he has not undergone the process of subjectifying his existence. He demonstrates the same incapacity to elevate himself over himself and achieve coherence in the eyes of his viewer that is characteristic of the ugly.

Along similar lines, Coleridge, quoting Plotinus, asserts that in confronting beauty, “the soul speaks of it as if it understood it, recognizes and welcomes it and as it were adapts itself to it. But when it encounters the ugly it shrinks back and rejects it and turns away from it and is out of tune and alienated from it.”43 The soul shrinks back from the lack of harmony it finds threatening to its own coherence; what it cannot comprehend it rejects. The Creature is alienated from everyone he confronts precisely because his ugliness prevents those he meets from seeing past his “real existence” to the greater sum of his being—or from imaginatively representing him at all. Indeed the one person (old man De Lacey) who forms an opinion of the Creature as an integrated being is blind—and hence unable to process his ugliness. By refusing that such ugliness can aesthetically exist, aesthetic theory itself turns away, shrinking back, rejecting, and (in Kant’s terms) setting its face against it.

IV. THE BIRTH OF THE UGLY IN FRANKENSTEIN

If the groundwork of aesthetic theory yields no better understanding of ugliness than its very resistance to aestheticization, we might attempt a dialectical transposition of the problem into its own solution. We might, in other words, conclude that such resistance itself, and the threat it poses to the very survival of the subject qua subject, is what defines the ugly. If the aesthetic can be considered the only mode of transcendence left in a highly rational, empirical age, then the de-aestheticizing ugly comes fraught with all the horror of not just primal
but final chaos, of apocalyptic destruction. From the outset, Victor
attempts to fortify himself against such destruction by identifying his
place within a larger network of national, political, and family ties:

I AM by birth a Genovese; and my family is one of the most distin-
guished of that republic. My ancestors had been for many years
counsellors and syndics; and my father had filled several public situ-
tions with honour and reputation. (F, 63)

By parceling out his subjective content into the various links that
comprise his chain of existence, Victor cloaks himself in the “pleasing
illusions” of symbolic identity. As he consecutively elides “family” and
“republic,” “ancestors” and “counsellors,” “father” and “public situ-
tions,” his genetic encoding fuses with the social, and his patrilinear and
largely patriotic conception of his origins serves to distance him from
the reality of the “birth” itself.

The Creature, on the other hand, whose birth is quite literally
patrilineal, plunges directly into the “strange chaos” (to borrow Burke’s
expression) of that birth:

IT is with considerable difficulty that I remember the original aera 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. (F, 130)

While Victor’s narrative commences under the pretense of absolute
clarity (“I am . . .”), the Creature emphasizes the murkiness of memory,
the “considerable difficulty” of remembering a past that is “confused
and indistinct”: a primal, amniotic sea of sensation.44 Yet the mere fact
that he tries to remember those origins distinguishes him from his
maker, who evades such messiness by describing a self that is a social,
and largely familial, construction: “My mother’s tender caresses, and my
father’s smile of benevolent pleasure while regarding me, are my first
recollections” (1831; F, 322). While Victor’s description illustrates the
Lacanian parental gaze, or the constitution of the subject as a “thing to
be looked at,” his own horrified parental gaze—a abruptly turned away at
the very instant the Creature is about to confirm himself as a subject and
return the gaze in the form of the infantile “grin” that “wrinkled his
cheeks” (F, 87)—parodies this formative moment.

Because the Creature cannot grasp hold of any symbolic connections
in reconstructing his past, he gropes blindly for the source of his “real”
being. He tries to remember the original era (“aera”) of that being as if it were a thing, an “aura” hovering about him as a sign of his integration into the world at large. His indistinct aera resembles the “eyry of freedom” that Mary Shelley associates with her own earliest memories in the 1831 introduction to *Frankenstein* (F, 361). As an alternate form of “aerie” or nest, the “eyry” of freedom may be seen as a realm of embryonic “aeration,” an original “aera” of being. And like the jumble of referents that hover around “aera,” the “strange multiplicity of sensations” that the Creature recalls as his earliest memories reflects the “strange chaos,” the monstrous Burkean disorder “of levity and ferocity, and of all sorts of crimes jumbled together” at the core of the social order. Revealingly, Adorno locates the origin of ugliness in the transition from the archaic to the post-archaic: “The concept of the ugly may well have originated in the separation of art from its archaic phase: It marks the permanent return of the archaic.”45 That same transition from the archaic-chaotic to a post-archaic, symbolic order is one the Creature cannot seem to accomplish for himself. He remains stuck, striving for subjective completion in the fermenting crack of the ugly.

Unable to affirm himself as a subject, the Creature thus commences his own autobiographical narrative by inverting Victor’s declarative “I am” into the pathetically interrogative “Who was I? What was I?”46 He despairs of “brother, sister, and all the various relationships which bind one human being to another in mutual bonds,” and then demands: “where were my friends and relations? No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses; . . . I had never yet seen a being resembling me, or who claimed any intercourse with me. What was I?” (F, 149). Throughout the novel, he continues to complain of his isolation—“No sympathy may I ever find” (F, 244), “I am quite alone” (F, 245), etc.—and the fact that he cannot identify his position in the signifying “chain of existence and events” (F, 174). This is a version of the same chain Byron, writing at the same time, has Manfred label “the chain of human ties.”47 Both are derived from the chain of phenomenal reality that Burke refers to in his aesthetic inquiry as the “great chain of causes, which linking one to another . . . can never be unravelled by any industry of ours” (E, 129).48 And it is this very “chain of existence,” from which the Creature is excluded, that keeps the other characters in the novel in existence—paradoxically, by repressing their “real existence.”

After Victor’s father, for instance, loses his wife, his son William, and his adoptive daughters Justine and Elizabeth to death, and his other son Victor to what he assumes must be madness, his “springs of existence” suddenly give way and he dies in Victor’s arms (1831; F, 356).49

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Elizabeth repeatedly reminds Victor of his own implication in the sustaining “chain of existence and events”: “We all . . . depend upon you; and if you are miserable, what must be our feelings?” (F, 181). Yet as we know from his own self-portrayal, Victor needs no reminding of his position in this intersubjective symbolic. He informs Clerval that without social connections “we are unfashioned creatures, but half made up” (1831; F, 320). With the deaths of his mother, brother, sister(s), and father, Victor himself becomes increasingly “unmade-up.” His family skin becomes fissured, and he is driven to renounce the national identity so important to his sense of self: “My first resolution was to quit Geneva for ever” (F, 225). As Frances Ferguson suggests, the skin of all symbolic identity in Frankenstein (“the skin of inclusiveness”) is inevitably overstretched.50

Ultimately, the same may be said for Frankenstein. Shelley’s novel has been traditionally criticized as uneven, a chaotic intertextual jumble. In a review of The Frankenstein Notebooks, Stuart Curran speaks of “the depth of the intertextuality in Frankenstein” and comes to the defense of Shelley’s authorship: “the entire machinery of this novel, from its knowledge of contemporary chemistry in the early chapters to its elaborate and ongoing play against Paradise Lost was the project of Mary Shelley.”51 His use of the term “machinery” is propitious, for it harks back to the Frankensteinian creative process: a method of production mechanical to the degree that it cannot contain its own reality. Although Shelley struggles to contain her “very hideous . . . idea” (1831; F, 360) in narrative frame after frame, the Creature himself will not be restrained by his textual “skin,” but instead breaks forth as one of the most enduring figures of the Romantic period. He takes on a life of his own, proliferating wildly and engendering an ever-increasing number of dramatic and cinematic adaptations, “hideous progeny” of the original “hideous progeny” (1831; F, 365).52

As he slips out of her text, he slips out of her control, and Shelley finds herself surprised, for example, at the theatrical success of Richard Brinsley Peake’s Presumption: or the Fate of Frankenstein, which opened at the English Opera House on 28 July 1823. The Creature remained nameless in that original production, and Shelley was immensely pleased that in the list of dramatis personae there was a blank space for the name of the Creature: “this nameless mode of naming the u[n]namable is rather good.”53 Her comment offers itself up to a facile deconstruction that were perhaps best handed over to Derrida for proper treatment. In his analysis of the Kantian Häßlichkeit [ugliness], Derrida writes: “The disgusting X cannot even announce itself as a

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sensible object without immediately being caught up in a teleological hierarchy. It is therefore in-sensitive and un-intelligible, irrepresentable and unnamable, the absolute other of the system.” In later enactments, this seeming aesthetic impossibility—the unrepresentable, unnamable positive manifestation of ugliness—takes over the identity of his creator and comes to be known as “Frankenstein.” Less than a month after Peak’s adaptation, for example, the Royal Court Theatre in London produced Frankenstein; or, The Demon of Switzerland, where in a slippery switching of subtitles, “The Demon of Switzerland” replaces “The Modern Prometheus.” The “or,” then, becomes a pivotal transition, a vanishing mediator between “Frankenstein” and “Demon,” with the latter threatening to engulf the former. Finally, as the Creature breaks out through the various pores (that is, the ——’s and or’s) in the text, he takes over the text itself, becoming, in effect, Frankenstein. The fact that it is common, if not de rigueur, for audiences to equate the Creature himself with Frankenstein (and consequently, Frankenstein) confirms the premise that no matter how one may attempt to contain it, the ugly ultimately bursts forth to consume whatever it confronts: in this case, Mary Shelley.

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NOTES

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The negative modality of the ugly was first recognized by Hegel's disciple Karl Rosenkranz, in his Aesthetik des Hässlichen (1853). Hegel himself conceives of beauty as a dynamic category in tension with its spectral other, the ugly. Yet because Hegel's Aesthetics (1823-28) postdates the development of the ugly in Frankenstein, this essay will focus on the late eighteenth-century aesthetic theory of Burke and Kant.


As Samuel H. Monk has pointed out, this binary of the sublime and the beautiful departs from the earlier binary of the "non-beautiful" and the beautiful, which the aesthetic theory of the first half of the century had employed: "Hume, it will be recalled, had taken pain and pleasure as the effects of the ugly and the beautiful, and it may be said that in general this was the point of view of the first half of the century" (Monk, The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England [Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1960], 91). I use the term "non-beautiful" since Hume does not concern himself with "the ugly"; rather, he claims that "the sentiments of men often differ with regard to beauty and deformity of all kinds" (Hume, 134; my emphasis). The distinction between ugliness and deformity is one Burke himself emphasizes in his Philosophical Enquiry, as we shall see.


Žižek remarks on a similar phenomenon in science fiction film, where the ugly often appears as an "excess of stuff that penetrates through the pores in the surface, from science fiction aliens whose liquid materiality overwhelms their surface... to the films of David Lynch where (exemplarily in Dune) the raw flesh beneath the surface threatens to emerge" (Abyss of Freedom, 22).

Technically, one need not shy away from this spectral aspect of the Creature since, as both Cousins and Žižek suggest, spectrality itself is a form of excess; it is the antithesis to ugliness in the form of ghosts, vampires, and other phantasms, who provide an excess of representation over existence. Victor himself refers to the Creature as a vampire: "my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave" (F, 105). One might further recall his origins in Fantasmagoriana, ou Recueil d'histories d'Apparitions de Spectres, Revenans, Fantomes, etc., the volume that inspired the guests at Villa Diodati (including Mary and Percy Shelley, John Polidori, and Byron) to try their hand at an original ghost story. When the Creature does present himself, however, it is always as an excess of existence.

Freud here relies upon Schelling's definition, which he selects from the complex etymology of the Unheimlich in "The Uncanny" (1919), in The Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud, ed. Philip Rieff, 10 vols. [New York: Collier, 1963], 10:27; emphasis in the original).

Freud, 19 ("remote region"; "The subject of").


16 Adorno makes a similar claim for different political ends, namely that the disruption of the social order is a positive effect of ugliness. For him, the ugly represents the socially repressed (in the sense of oppressed), and he argues that in order to avoid deteriorating into a vacuous plaything, art must assert the ugliness of the social real against the ideological status quo of the beautiful ideal. Ugliness thus acquires a social dimension that Burke would acknowledge, but condemn. See Theodor Adorno, “The Ugly, the Beautiful, and Technique,” in Aesthetic Theory, 2d ed., ed. Greta Adorno and Rolf Tiedeman, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1996), 45-61. One also finds the socio-political disruptive potential of the ugly in the aesthetic theory of Kant: the ugly threatens the community of feeling subjects united in the intersubjective realm of the imaginative ideal.

17 Cousins, “The Ugly” (part 1), 62.


21 Coleridge, “Principles,” 371; emphasis in the original.

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Victor’s method of selecting the most beautiful parts and suturing them together parallels another “mechanistic” process in vogue during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries: the mode of anthologizing beauties. Volumes of " Beauties" were produced from recycled parts, which could be culled either from a single poetic corpus or from several corpora (as in the case of The Beauties of Milton, Thomson, and Young [1783]) to form a composite textual body in the Frankensteinian mode. Whether this process of clipping and culling and stitching together calls more attention to the individual beauties or to the fissures in the overall product, it is not my purpose to discover. Suffice it to note that if Victor had textual precedent for his artistic method of selecting anatomical beauties, he faced the added challenge of animating them into something greater than the sum of their parts.

The qualities of “yellowness” and “wateriness” are also prominent in Shelley’s portrait of the Creature as he first appeared to her “with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes” in the 1831 introduction (F, 365).

Zižek, Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1993), 240 n.


Milton, “Second Defense,” 582. He adds: “Ugly I have never been thought by anyone, to my knowledge, who has laid eyes on me. Whether I am handsome or not, I am less concerned” (582-83).

This 1831 description dwells longer on Elizabeth’s physical appearance (vs. her mind and manners) than the 1818 edition. Yet since the two versions do not conflict in any way that is relevant here, I will draw upon them both.

Wollstonecraft, 128. The Creature’s status as a distinct (subhuman) species recalls the downtrodden Jemima from Wollstonecraft’s unfinished novel Maria, who complains that she was “treated like a creature of another species”: “I was . . . hunted from family to family, [I] belonged to nobody—and nobody cared for me. I was despised from my birth, and denied the chance of obtaining a footing for myself in society” (Maria; or the Wrongs of Woman [1798; New York: W. W. Norton, 1975], 38-40). Although Jemima ultimately earns a place within society, the Creature’s ugliness blocks all of his efforts to become “linked to the chain of existence and events, from which [he is] excluded” (F, 174).


Notably, Milton’s other major defense against the charge of being ugly is that of his smooth skin: “Nor is it true that either my body or my skin is shriveled” (“Second Defense,” 583).

Along similar lines, Burke identifies smallness as a quality of the beautiful: “A great beautiful thing, is a manner of expression scarcely ever used; but that of a great ugly thing, is very common” (E, 113).


This scene might be read against the Lacanian thesis that “a minimum of ‘idealization,’ of the interposition of fantasmatic frame [sic] by means of which the subject assumes a distance vis-à-vis the Real, is constitutive of our sense of reality—
'reality' occurs insofar as it is not (it does not come) 'too close'” (Žižek, Abyss of Freedom, 23).


37 Samuel Richardson, Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded (1740; New York: W. W. Norton, 1958), 206; emphasis in the original. Compare to Mary Shelley, Journals, 1:146-47.


40 Adorno, 51.

41 Blake, Descriptive Catalogue (1809), in The Complete Poetry & Prose, 526.

42 Blake, Descriptive Catalogue, 544-45.

43 Coleridge, “Principles,” 383 n. In similar terms, Kierkegaard writes of Socrates, who “spoke about loving the ugly”: “What then is meant by the beautiful? The beautiful is the immediate and direct object of immediate love, the choice of inclination and of passion. Surely there is no need to command that one shall love the beautiful. But the ugly! This is not anything to offer to inclination and passion, which turn away and say, ‘Is that anything to love!’” (Soren Kierkegaard, Works of Love [1847], trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995], 373).

44 This must not be confounded with the “monstrous birth” described in Ellen Moers’s seminal essay “Female Gothic,” in her Literary Women (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 90-110. For even the most monstrous human birth yields a creature who is always already inscribed into a family, a citizenship, a language, and a gender.

45 Adorno, 47.

46 Compare with Adam’s more hopeful wonderment in Paradise Lost (8.270-71).


48 An internalized version of the signifying chain appears later in the novel, when Victor claims: “I know not by what chain of thought the idea presented itself” (F, 206).

49 In the 1818 text his death results from an “apoplectic fit,” which is a more scientific way of saying that “the springs of existence gave way” (F, 222).


