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Education as a Pharmakon in Mary Shelley’s FRANKENSTEIN

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Education can be described without more ado as an incitement to the conquest of the pleasure principle, and to its replacement by the reality principle.

—Sigmund Freud, “Two Principles of Mental Functioning”

The Romantic Age, according to Alan Richardson, brought on an “intense concern with education” (4), and major Romantic writers are often keen to deal with this in their writings. Mary Shelley, among others, contributes to this theme in *Frankenstein* (first published in 1818) by presenting the quandary of Frankenstein’s education and of the monster’s. Following a demonic ambition to explore physiology and anatomy without any assistance, Frankenstein endows himself with the divine power to create a “miserable monster” that fills his heart with “breathless horror and disgust” (39). In order to shake off the misery of his “accursed origin” (105), the monster turns himself into an arduous learner of human language—a key to human society—and yet discovers that his pain only intensifies with the increase of knowledge and that human beings are in fact monstrous as well. In the cases of Frankenstein and the monster alike, we see that education leads not merely to self-improvement but rather self-destruction. In what follows, then, I would like to concentrate on Shelley’s portrayal of the monster’s education, which occupies at least one-third of the novel, to cast light on both the ways in which the

monster develops—through language acquisition—from “a creature of fine sensations” to one of “evil passions” (120–21), and the ways in which his growth as such may very well show Shelley’s aim to unveil education as, in Derrida’s terms, a *pharmakon*, the mélange of both remedy and poison, pleasure and pain (99).

Frankenstein is a kind of *Bildungsroman*, or novel of education, in terms of the monster’s development from ignorance to a solid understanding of the human condition, from a natural state to a cultured one. In the novel, the mental growth of the monster is imbued with Lockean empiricism: his mind begins as a *tabula rasa* to be written on by observation and sensory experience. In his initial encounter with the world, the monster’s sensory experience teaches him the function of fire, housing, and language, as well as the feeling of pain, pleasure, and “a mixture of pain and pleasure” (85). Also, “through a small and almost imperceptible chink” (85) in a hovel, he observes the “gentle manners” (87) of his human neighbors—the De Lacey family—which touch him so deeply as to stop him from stealing some of the family’s food for his own consumption. More importantly the encounter kindles his desire to join human society. The De Lacey family inscribes on the monster’s mind not merely gentle manners but “perfect forms,” that is, “their grace, beauty, and delicate complexions” (90). Their “perfect forms,” however, make him frighteningly aware of his monstrosity when he observes his own mirror image on a pool: “At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification” (90). This experience runs counter to Lacan’s notion of “the mirror stage” (*le stade du miroir*), which gives birth to the narcissistic ideal ego (*Ideal-Ich* or *moi idéal*)¹ and to the *imaginary*, or illusory, gestalt of the body (*Écrits* 2). It is fair to say that the monster’s “mirror stage” exists in the “perfect forms” of the De Lacey family, who later, for the monster, act as a model of *symbolic* perfection—that is, the ego-ideal (*idéal du moi*) (*Séminaire* 414)—against which he examines himself as a “[m]iserable, unhappy wretch” (97). It is important to observe that the monster’s self examination follows his account of learning the art of language, which is to say, it occurs after his entering the *symbolic* order of things.

The monster’s desire to master human language arises from his aspiration to be accepted and loved by the De Lacey family—and indeed, all of human society—inasmuch as he sees command of language as a royal road to the family’s disregard for his deformity. Acquiring language, however, becomes for him a *pharmakon*: it is both medicinal and poisonous, “a mixture of pain and pleasure,” in that the better he masters human language, the more knowledge he is able to gain, and the sharper his awareness of his deformity and his friendless life. For instance, after diligently studying Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, one of the three

books he discovers by accident, the monster regards Satan rather than Adam as “the fitter emblem of [his] condition” and, furthermore, considers himself even more miserable than Satan: “Satan had his companions, fellow devils, to admire and encourage him, but I am solitary and abhorred” (105). The ego-ideal—which operates in the *symbolic* order of language and socialization—constantly and hauntingly reminds him of his forlorn, helpless, and wretched life. He relies on language to satisfy his desire for the *imaginary*, the perfect forms of the De Laceys, and yet painfully realizes that language, as Peter Brooks cogently puts it, “has contextualized desire as lack” and can never “provide a way to overcome lack and satisfy desire” (93): “Increase of knowledge,” the monster mournfully remarks, “only discovered to me more clearly what a wretched outcast I was. I cherished hope, it is true, but it vanished when I beheld my person reflected in water or my shadow in the moonshine” (106). That is to say, increase of knowledge turns out to smother his hope for winning human love to the extent of provoking his drive toward death and self-destruction:

Of what a strange nature is knowledge! It clings to the mind, when it has once seized on it, like a lichen on the rock. I wished sometimes to shake off all thought and feeling; but I learned that there was but one means to overcome the sensation of pain, and that was death. (96)

His hope is completely extinguished by his first and last contact with the De Lacey family. He wholeheartedly expects the De Laceys—who indirectly educate him to be good and kindhearted—to overlook his deformed figure and become his friends, only to find that this virtuous family whom he has “sincerely love[d]” (108) is not much different from the barbarous villagers who attacked him earlier in the novel. It comes as no surprise, then, that the benevolent monster turns into a cynical murderer, paying back the violence of human society with violence against it.

“Sorrow only increase[s] with knowledge” (96), the monster exclaims after mastering human language. Indeed, mastering language can never gratify his desire for the *imaginary*, but instead leads him to discover the unrelenting answer to the question that once occurred to him during the process of his education: “Was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous, and magnificent, yet so vicious and base?” (95).

Note

¹In his *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, Dylan Evans calls attention to the fact that Lacan—although initially employing the term *je-idéal* to render Freud’s *Ideal-Ich* (see, for

instance, *Écrits*)—"soon abandons this practice and for the rest of his work uses the term *moi idéal*" (52). Here I therefore indicate both *Ideal-Ich* and *moi idéal*.

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