Romantic Theory

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It starts with a dream. In her 1831 Introduction to *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley describes a conversation (June 17, 1816) at the Villa Diodati (near Geneva) between Byron and her husband. Her Introduction says they talked about “the nature of the principle of life, and whether there was any probability of its ever being discovered and communicated.” Discussion focuses on the experiments of Erasmus Darwin, especially one where a piece of vermicelli placed under a glass case appears to display voluntary motion. But Byron and Percy remain skeptical: “Not thus, after all, would life be given. Perhaps a corpse would be re-animated; galvanism had given token of such things: perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth.” Their talk lasts late into the night. Finally the three go to bed. But Mary finds herself unable to sleep:

> When I placed my head on my pillow, I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie. I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision,—I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion. Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his odious handywork, horror-stricken. He would hope that, left to itself, the slight spark of life which he had communicated would fade; that this thing, which had received such imperfect animation, would subside into dead matter; and he might sleep in the belief that the silence of the grave would quench for ever the transient existence of the hideous corpse which he had looked upon as the cradle of life. He sleeps; but he is awakened; he
opens his eyes; behold the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening his curtains, and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes. I opened mine in terror. The idea so possessed my mind, that a thrill of fear ran through me, and I wished to exchange the ghastly image of my fancy for the realities around. I see them still; the very room, the dark parquet, the closed shutters, with the moonlight struggling through, and the sense I had that the glassy lake and white high Alps were beyond. I could not so easily get rid of my hideous phantasm; still it haunted me. (Novels 1: 179–80)

Significantly, the passage isn’t clear about whether Mary is asleep or awake. Yes, she begins: “I did not sleep.” Yet she immediately qualifies that: “Nor could I be said to think.” Normally, wakefulness involves some form of awareness (i.e., thought). Subsequently, we read: “my imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie.” Now while wakefulness implies at least some control over mental images, passivity about these points to sleep. And if we didn’t know better, we might easily think that what we have here is an account of that unique moment, fraught with both pleasure and anxiety, in which we fall asleep. Note, too, the mention of “successive” images. In falling asleep, we frequently perceive a succession of images—as if the mind had lost its mental grip, and hence its capacity to fix on just one. As we relax, then, the images flow more freely. So here we have, again, a hint of passivity. For Shelley, these images merely “arose in my mind,” a product of the most involuntary sort of genesis. All the same, they possess “a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie.” Reverie, though, can often precede sleep. Like sleep, moreover, it involves a kind of mental relaxation, whereby the mind, disengaged from both thoughts and images, gains some respite from their tyranny.

At this point, Shelley blurs the distinction between sleep and wakefulness yet further. While various traits (mental vacuity, passivity, successive images) suggest sleep, her “acute mental vision” says otherwise. Nonetheless, she does admit her eyes were shut. Nor in fact does sleep preclude acute mental vision. On the contrary: vivid dream imagery can often result from a heightened perceptual capacity. Given all that, we might wonder why Shelley insists she was awake.

One way to look at the matter might be in terms of how her wakefulness will affect the balance between subjectivity and objectivity. In sleep, we get to alter what we don’t like. All the external forces that seem to pose a threat of any kind, all the pressure we just can’t manage to get rid of: if we could only sleep, so we think, we might be able to dream all of these away. Sleep, then, favors pure
subjectivity. Unfortunately, we can’t sleep all the time. And since we can’t, we need some other way to fend off the pressure we feel from objectivity or external forces. So we try to conceptualize those forces. In that way, we no longer feel their radical otherness as a threat to our own subjectivity. Once that otherness has been conceptualized, we feel our relation to it has ceased to be purely passive. Because we can conceptualize radical otherness, we believe we can somehow assimilate it into our own subjectivity. Whether we actually can or not is, of course, another question. But we need to believe in our capacity to do it. So we conceptualize external nature, in order to avoid objectivity. By means of concepts, we transform objectivity into subjectivity. Hence the appeal of theory.¹

Like Shelley, the protagonist vacillates between sleep and wakefulness. His first response to his creation is to rush away from it in horror. Wishfully, he thinks the problem will somehow resolve itself: “He would hope that, left to itself, the slight spark of life which he had communicated would fade; that this thing, which had received such imperfect animation, would subside into dead matter.” The sequel is less easy to explain: “and he might sleep in the belief that the silence of the grave would quench for ever the transient existence of the hideous corpse which he had looked upon as the cradle of life.” Why sleep? If worried his creation might survive, shouldn’t the protagonist go back and check on it? What if the creature were to survive and escape? Here the impersonal conditional (“and he might sleep”) only highlights what’s already paradoxical. Doesn’t Shelley herself feel how absurd his wish is? On that point, a biographical detail from History of a Six Weeks’ Tour seems useful. We know that their Channel crossing proved quite dangerous for the Shelleys: violent seas, quick flashes of lightning, and even a thunder squall that sent waves into their small boat. Yet Mary (who admits she was “dreadfully seasick”) slept for most of the night, and woke up only as they entered Calais, despite an apparent awareness of their peril (Novels 8: 15). So sleep acts as a deliberate response to danger. Likewise for the protagonist: after the text suggests he might sleep, we’re then told he does sleep. But if sleep is what he wants, it’s also what he can’t get. Instead, he’s awakened by the creature itself: “behold the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening his curtains, and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes.” Thus a protagonist intent on sleep as a way to avoid the creature he’s created is roused by that same creature, determined to make the protagonist confront what he wants to avoid.

In their mutual gaze, one detail stands out particularly: the eyes of the creature are said to be “yellow, watery, but speculative.” If the first two adjectives are purely physical, the third has an eerie, troubling quality. “Speculative” in-
variably refers to thought, of a human kind. And with that, we enter the realm of subjectivity. So the creature gazes at the protagonist with the same sort of reflective consciousness as the protagonist himself. Whatever the protagonist feels about the creature, then, could just as easily be felt by the creature about the protagonist. “Speculative”: the word evokes *speculum* (lit., mirror). Taken figuratively, it might suggest the protagonist sees his own image reflected back to himself. Not exactly, of course. And yet, if we recognize an other as some form of our own subjectivity, the crucial moment for the protagonist occurs when he recognizes a similar subjectivity.

This moment of recognition duplicates itself: just as the protagonist “opens his eyes” to “behold the horrid thing” at his bedside, so Shelley, likewise: “I opened mine in terror.” On a larger scale, too, the resemblances multiply. After all, both Shelley and the protagonist try some form of imaginative creation. The text hints at their relationship, with the protagonist as “the pale student of unhallowed arts.” Subsequently, he’s even specifically termed an “artist.” And, in a complicated way, their creations also get linked explicitly. Shelley says: “I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out.” “Phantasm” = something dreamlike, even illusory. Similarly, the protagonist’s sleep seeks to reduce the creature’s existence to a dreamlike level.

Yet in one important respect, Shelley and her protagonist clearly differ. We’ve seen that the protagonist sleeps to avoid the creature he’s created. Shelley, meanwhile, does the exact opposite: for her, it’s crucial she open her eyes in order to “exchange the ghastly image of my fancy for the realities around.” Nor is it insignificant that years later she can still recall what she saw vividly: “the very room, the dark parquet, the closed shutters, with the moonlight struggling through, and the sense I had that the glassy lake and white high Alps were beyond.” Note that she doesn’t actually *see* the “glassy lake,” nor the “white high Alps” (despite her visual description of these). Note, too, how her own darkened bedroom matches that of her protagonist. Hence her need for a “sense” of the lake and Alps beyond: otherwise the resemblances between her own situation and his could become unbearable.²

Finally, we might wonder about the “terror” Shelley professes to feel. Here her earlier comment is useful: “for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world.” Curiously, though, it isn’t the failure to replicate what the Creator has done that’s most frightful. On the contrary: “his success would terrify the artist.” But why? Wouldn’t it lead to a sense of Godlike capacity? To understand why that doesn’t happen, we should keep in mind that what frightens the protagonist most
is his ability to communicate the “spark of life” to his creation. Thus, by purely mechanical means, the protagonist can create a distinct subjectivity. And the reason this has the power to terrify is that we can’t understand how a purely physical/chemical apparatus could give rise to the equivalent of a human consciousness. Hence the “terror” that seizes Shelley.

In fact, what primarily concerns Shelley isn’t the creature itself. Instead, her frisson probably comes from the “speculative” quality of the creature’s gaze, which she mentions just before she tells us how she opened her own eyes in terror. Even the way she describes it makes it uncannily suggestive. When she says, “I opened mine in terror,” her use of “mine” can be understood only by reference to the previous sentence, which talks about the eyes of the creature. So the creature’s subjectivity forces Shelley to recognize her own. The “ghastly image of my fancy” is ghastly precisely because of its complex relation to her own subjectivity. Were the image either similar or dissimilar exclusively, it would be easy to rationalize it. As similar and dissimilar simultaneously, it becomes uncanny.

To understand why it’s so difficult to come to terms with another subjectivity, we might look at the creation episode more closely. Curiously, the 1818 text places a lot of emphasis on a detail the 1831 Introduction doesn’t even mention, the dream that comes to Victor Frankenstein after he animates the creature:

I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room, and continued a long time traversing my bed-chamber, unable to compose my mind to sleep. At length lassitude succeeded to the tumult I had before endured; and I threw myself on the bed in my clothes, endeavouring to seek a few moments of forgetfulness. But it was in vain: I slept indeed, but I was disturbed by the wildest dreams. I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. (Novels 1: 40)

Here it’s important to note that the “dreams” Victor has while asleep aren’t by any means the first to be mentioned. Instead, his two-year period of labor on the
creature is itself a dream of some kind: “now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished.” While in pursuit of his goal, however, Victor “had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation.” Evidently, then, the “beauty” of the dream comes from the passion of his pursuit. From that standpoint, fulfillment is clearly antithetical to what the dream itself offers. Likewise, the “breathless horror and disgust” when it comes to an end only emphasize the primacy of pursuit over fulfillment.

On a more general level, we might argue for the primacy of subjectivity over objectivity. Wholly emotional in emphasis, the dream is equivalent to pure subjectivity. Conversely, the actual process of creation, as the manipulation of a wholly material element, is purely objective to Victor. As he sees it, the problem is that he can’t assimilate the objective (i.e., the creature) to his own subjectivity. The fact that he “selected his [i.e., the creature’s] features as beautiful” (Novels 1: 39) shows he wanted to make his creation conform to the beauty of his dream subjectivity. Unfortunately, it doesn’t work out that way: “Beautiful! —Great God!” (Novels 1: 39). His exclamation points to the source of his difficulty: unless he can create ex nihilo like God, what he produces is bound to betray the limitations of his material. As he rushes from his workplace, “unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created,” he experiences the shock of a confrontation with objectivity. Nor is it accidental that he rushes from workplace to bedroom: once his waking dream goes awry, his only wish is for the dreams that accompany sleep.

Yet even before he falls asleep, what Victor does is already indicative of his mood. Despite his efforts, he “continued a long time traversing my bed-chamber, unable to compose my mind to sleep.” Clearly, sleep doesn’t come without a struggle. But struggle means expenditure of energy. And so “at length lassitude succeeded to the tumult I had before endured.” Simply put, he no longer has the energy to shape his dreams. Whereas earlier he had tried “to compose my mind to sleep,” he now hopes at most for “a few moments of forgetfulness.” In vain: “I slept indeed, but I was disturbed by the wildest dreams.” Here exhaustion from his efforts to sleep produces lassitude, which is tantamount to passivity. As a result, he becomes vulnerable to whatever fears arise from his circumstances.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Victor’s dream is the degree to which it symbolically gives away the plot of the entire novel. The dream begins with Elizabeth, depicted as “in the bloom of health.” Yet this quickly leads to an ironic reversal, so that the same Elizabeth is soon marked by “the hue of death” just as emphatically. The reversal is obviously dreamlike: it allows the narrator to alter a situation in a way rarely found in everyday life. Likewise, the very mention of
Elizabeth as an apparently aimless promeneur in a town or city like Ingolstadt renders her *disponible* to the narratorial gaze. In fact, Elizabeth never comes to Ingolstadt. Instead, the novel associates her throughout with the domestic sphere, which is based in Geneva. Ingolstadt, by contrast, is about study, far away from all domestic presences. For Elizabeth to appear *disponible* in Ingolstadt, then, points to desire symbolically.

In this novel, however, desire seems destined only to be frustrated: as soon as Victor “imprinted the first kiss on her lips,” they turn “livid with the hue of death.” What exactly, though, does “first kiss” mean here? If Victor and Elizabeth are in love, it’s hard to believe they haven’t kissed already. So perhaps “first kiss” looks forward proleptically to their subsequent wedding night. Seen in that way, the dream posits a causal relationship: Victor kisses Elizabeth, and the kiss results in her death. Or, in terms of plot, Victor decides to marry Elizabeth, which prompts the creature to murder her after Victor’s refusal to create a female creature. Since the murder comes about precisely because Victor denies the creature a happiness he (Victor) seeks for himself, his marriage to Elizabeth becomes the indirect cause of her unfortunate end.

Yet if the dream episode is simply meant to expose a hidden causal relationship, we might wonder why Elizabeth should come to look like Victor’s mother. As Victor himself puts it, “her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms.” If we resist the obvious Oedipal perspective, we discover, on a more purely formal level, a whole complex of causal relationships. Elizabeth, after all, had indirectly brought about the death of Victor’s mother, who catches scarlet fever from her adopted child. So we have Victor in the same relation to Elizabeth as hers vis-à-vis his mother. Clearly, loss is the dominant theme. All relationships lead to loss, in each case that of a beloved object. Brought about by causal relationships, these losses suggest in turn an external necessity of some kind.

In effect, necessity counters subjectivity. Whereas subjectivity wants to possess the beloved object, necessity works against that. When Victor tries to kiss Elizabeth, her lips take on a deathly hue. And, as if this weren’t enough, her features metamorphose into those of his mother. Now, even the pleasure of the gaze is denied. Meanwhile, the beloved object also eludes him temporally: for Elizabeth to change into his mother places her agewise at a further remove. And physically as well: no longer able to kiss Elizabeth, he can only hold his mother in his arms. Yet even she becomes less accessible: “a shroud enveloped her form.” Now he can’t even see her. What he does see, instead, is simply frightful: “And I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel.” So the dream is about the
triumph of objectivity over subjectivity. Not only can he not possess the beloved object, but he even has to witness the process by which that object gets lost and ultimately destroyed.\textsuperscript{5}

At the same time, the whole nightmare occurs within a distinctly subjective framework. The causal sequence that links Elizabeth’s death to that of Victor’s mother is based on a highly subjective portrayal of events, one that compresses and even omits relevant circumstances. Nor is there any voice other than that of the narrator. But without other voices, the dream will presumably have no awareness of its own subjectivity. So what happens when another voice speaks, and thereby breaks the spell?

To some extent, that’s exactly what the creature does with his narrative. It ends with a request: “We may not part until you have promised to comply with my requisition. I am alone, and miserable; man will not associate with me; but one as deformed and horrible as myself would not deny herself to me. My companion must be of the same species, and have the same defects. This being you must create” (\textit{Novels} 1: 107). Oddly, Victor doesn’t seem to understand the request at all. His initial response shows, in effect, how hard it is for one subjectivity to recognize another. Specifically, he says: “But I was bewildered, perplexed, and unable to arrange my ideas sufficiently to understand the full extent of his proposition” (\textit{Novels} 1: 107). Why can’t he understand what the creature wants? On some level, we have to assume Victor simply can’t imagine the creature with a female companion. In other words, he can’t imagine why the creature would want what he himself wants. Which is to say: he can’t see the creature as a subjectivity.

Significantly, what makes him grasp the request is its appeal to rights. As the creature puts it: “You must create a female for me, with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being. This you alone can do; and I demand it of you as a right which you must not refuse” (\textit{Novels} 1: 108). Although Victor neglects to explain his anger, it presumably comes from a belief that the creature has, by his acts of violence, forfeited any claim based on the social compact. Meanwhile, the epithet “fiend” suggests a wish to deny him a place in society categorically. After all, a “fiend” is malevolent by nature, rather than merely because of circumstances. In addition, the term connotes the demonic, or some evil supernatural agency. Given the actual circumstances, however, the only plausible explanation would seem to be that Victor is genuinely biased against his own creation, and that his bias is due to his own subjectivity.

Seemingly aware of that bias, the creature establishes his “right” to a place in society by the way he demonstrates his subjectivity:
You are in the wrong . . . and, instead of threatening, I am content to reason with you. I am malicious because I am miserable; am I not shunned and hated by all mankind? You, my creator, would tear me to pieces, and triumph; remember that, and tell me why I should pity man more than he pities me? You would not call it murder, if you could precipitate me into one of those ice-rifts, and destroy my frame, the work of your own hands. Shall I respect man, when he contemns me? Let him live with me in the interchange of kindness, and, instead of injury, I would bestow every benefit upon him with tears of gratitude at his acceptance. . . . But I now indulge in dreams of bliss that cannot be realized. What I ask of you is reasonable and moderate; I demand a creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself: the gratification is small, but it is all that I can receive, and it shall content me. It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another. Our lives will not be happy, but they will be harmless, and free from the misery I now feel. Oh! my creator, make me happy; let me feel gratitude towards you for one benefit! Let me see that I excite the sympathy of some existing thing; do not deny me my request!

(Novels 1: 108–9)

The creature says, first of all, that rather than try to threaten, he wants to “reason” with his creator. Clearly, Victor himself had been totally emotional in response to the creature’s request. The fact that the creature knows it is equally significant. It points to a distinct moral awareness on his part. Likewise, his description of his own act as rational displays a comparable intellectual awareness. We can only describe an act as rational if we know what rationality is. And to know that, we have to be capable of rational analysis. But a higher moral awareness + a capacity for rational analysis is more or less equivalent to subjectivity. And presumably possession of subjectivity should entitle one to ethical consideration.

Yet the creature doesn’t just stop there. Instead, he also evinces an ability to perceive causal relationships: “I am malicious because I am miserable; am I not shunned and hated by all mankind?” Whereas Victor would probably contend “The creature is malicious; consequently he is shunned and hated by all mankind and hence miserable,” the creature points out it would be more accurate to say: “I am malicious because I am miserable, and I am miserable because I am shunned and hated by all mankind.” In other words, hatred and rejection by mankind have caused his malice. Here he shows a firm sense of how causal relationships work. His knowledge of causal relationships confirms, in turn, his capacity for rational analysis, and hence his subjectivity.
His perception that his “rights” argument doesn’t persuade Victor moves the creature to make one last appeal. “Let him [i.e., “man”] live with me in the interchange of kindness,” he says, “and, instead of injury, I would bestow every benefit upon him with tears of gratitude at his acceptance.” I find this one of the most poignant moments in the text. The creature asks Victor to consider a mutual existence based on the “interchange of kindness.” Yet the creature manifestly expects to give much more than he’ll receive. Even so, he insists he’ll shed “tears of gratitude” at the acceptance of his generosity. But why should he be grateful, if the balance of kindness is on his side? To some extent, “acceptance” of a benefit implies recognition of the giver. All the creature wants, then, is to be recognized as a subjectivity capable of intentionality. To recognize the subjectivity of the creature, however, would necessitate, as he himself realizes, a different conception of subjectivity. And so, finally: “But I now indulge in dreams of bliss that cannot be realized.”

Precisely because he’s no longer hopeful about a shared existence with humanity, the creature now makes a very different kind of request: “I demand a creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself; the gratification is small, but it is all I can receive, and it shall content me.” At first glance, admittedly, his proposal might seem extravagant. After all, it involves the creation of another creature. Nevertheless, what it really points to is a drastically reduced sense of social possibility. Here we need to recall that, though physically ugly himself, the creature is fully aware of the difference between the ugly and the beautiful, and strongly inclined to the second. So when he asks for “a creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself,” he appears to have in mind what might be workable rather than what he might really want. No wonder his gratification will be small. At the same time, he says: “it is all that I can receive, and it shall content me.” But why so modest? Presumably any female companion Victor creates will also be endowed with the same aesthetic faculty as the creature. Were she also less ugly, it’s easy to see how she might prefer another companion. In other words, the creature takes into account the subjectivity of the new creature he wants his maker to produce. His request also shows he won’t impose himself on another subjectivity. Instead, he seems to hope that, exposed to the same sort of treatment he’s received, she’ll then turn to him as her only choice.

At that point, the creature observes, “we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world.” Note that their monstrosity won’t be due to their acts (if completely isolated, how can their acts possibly affect anyone?). Instead, I would argue, they become “monsters” precisely because they’re cut off from humanity. It’s their isolation, rather than their physical deformity, that’s monstrous or unnatural:
their natural tendency is to associate with others. As the creature puts it: “Our lives will not be happy, but they will be harmless, and free from the misery I now feel.” If a female companion won't suffice to make him happy, the real source of his present misery must presumably be his exclusion from the human sphere, its refusal to recognize him as a legitimate subjectivity. When he asks Victor to “make me happy,” he says the way to do it is to “let me feel gratitude towards you for one benefit!” The fact that a single act of generosity by his creator can gratify him more than the constant companionship of a female creature points to what’s at issue here. A free, voluntary act of generosity would indicate a desire for relation to him, hence an acknowledgment of his subjectivity. By contrast, if a female creature becomes attached to him, he feels it will simply be from a lack of better choices.

To some extent, we can measure the effect of the creature’s appeal by the way Victor thinks about whether to create a second, female creature:

I sat one evening in my laboratory; the sun had set, and the moon was just rising from the sea; I had not sufficient light for my employment, and I remained idle, in a pause of consideration of whether I should leave my labour for the night, or hasten its conclusion by an unremitting attention to it. As I sat, a train of reflection occurred to me, which led me to consider the effects of what I was now doing. Three years before I was engaged in the same manner, and had created a fiend whose unparalleled barbarity had desolated my heart, and filled it for ever with the bitterest remorse. I was now about to form another being, of whose dispositions I was alike ignorant; she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate, and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness. He had sworn to quit the neighbourhood of man, and hide himself in deserts; but she had not; and she, who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply with a compact made before her creation. They might even hate each other; the creature who already lived loathed his own deformity, and might he not conceive a greater abhorrence for it when it came before his eyes in the female form? She also might turn with disgust from him to the superior beauty of man; she might quit him, and he be again alone, exasperated by the fresh provocation of being deserted by one of his own species. (Novels 1: 128)

In several ways, the present scene mirrors the earlier creation scene. Both occur more or less at night. The twilight atmosphere of the present scene makes a reflective pause seem especially natural. Victor ponders “whether I should leave my labour for the night, or hasten its conclusion by an unremitting attention to it.” In contrast to his earlier behavior, he now seems more aware, more
disposed to consider consequences. After all, he’s been there before. “Three years before I was engaged in the same manner,” he says. So the present scene is, in many respects, a deliberate *reprise* of the earlier one.

On one point, nevertheless, it differs from the earlier creation episode: it begins with a distinct awareness of the problems introduced by a new subjectivity. “I was now about to form another being,” reflects Victor, “of whose dispositions I was alike ignorant.” He also has to be careful not to assume the new female creature will necessarily be like the male he’s already created: “He [the original creature] had sworn to quit the neighbourhood of man, and hide himself in deserts; but she had not.” In addition, there are the problems of intersubjectivity: “they might even hate each other.” Finally, Victor considers other, less immediately foreseeable consequences: “the creature who already lived loathed his own deformity, and might he not conceive a greater abhorrence for it when it came before his eyes in the female form?” His remark that the creature “loathed his own deformity” marks a new level in his awareness of a different subjectivity. But for Victor to suppose the creature might “conceive a greater abhorrence for it [his own deformity] when it came before his eyes in the female form” displays an even greater acuteness. It ascribes to the creature some sense of what might be appropriate to a female creature. For that, the creature would need to have perceived the female (based on his experience of humanity) as inherently finer, more beautiful than the male. And that would in turn imply some sort of aesthetic faculty.

In what he says about the female creature’s subjectivity, Victor displays a similar subtlety. He worries the female creature “also might turn with disgust from him [the male creature] to the superior beauty of man; she might quit him, and he be again alone.” Her disgust, though, needn’t be based simply on a comparative perspective. It might also involve an element of self-consciousness. After all, the original creature (as Victor points out) “loathed his own deformity.” Why shouldn’t the female do the same? And if she did, wouldn’t the prospect of union with someone as ugly as herself intensify what she felt about her own deformity? Without self-awareness, meanwhile, she might willingly accept someone considerably less attractive than herself (whether from compassion, or some other motive). In both instances, then, Victor appears not only to recognize but even to grasp a subjectivity quite different from his own.

On a deeper level, however, Victor nonetheless constructs the subjectivity of the creature and its hypothetical companion in ways ultimately shaped by his own subjective standpoint. Thus after he admits the female creature he’s about to create is one “of whose dispositions I was alike ignorant,” he wonders if “she
might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate, and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness.” How likely, though, is this? Clearly, the creature’s narrative offers ample testimony to an innate disposition to kindness. With no social education, the creature feels an ardent desire to help the De Lacey family. His impulse is all the more remarkable given his previous adverse experiences. But if the original creature is so disposed, why should Victor think a female creature would be different? In fact, he even goes so far as to suppose a propensity to “delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness.” In other words, a fiend. Significantly, Victor’s already termed the original creature a fiend. Yet nowhere does the text indicate he committed his acts of violence from a “delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness.” Indeed, given the hostility he’s suffered, he has plenty of motive (Novels 1: 74). Thus his depiction as a fiend looks more like an effort to construct his subjectivity as a form of objectivity (i.e., creature as fiend, where fiend = infernal machine). In addition, it shows why Victor might interpret the female creature in the same way.

But perhaps the most extreme instance of arbitrary construction occurs as Victor considers what might happen if the female creature were to “turn with disgust from him to the superior beauty of man.” At that point, Victor suggests, “she might quit him, and he be again alone, exasperated by the fresh provocation of being deserted by one of his own species.” Although Victor seems to think the creature will then renew his hostility against humanity, it isn’t at all clear he’ll do that simply because of his failure to win a companion. On the contrary: since the entire scheme would depend wholly on Victor’s goodwill, for the creature to turn on his benefactor seems manifestly irrational. Nor does the text indicate that he ever acts irrationally. So the suspicion hardly seems justified.

Nevertheless, Victor appears to make a genuine attempt to live within another subjectivity. Otherwise it would be hard to explain how he could devote months of labor to the creation of a female creature. Note, moreover, the remorse he feels after he destroys it: “The remains of the half-finished creature, whom I had destroyed, lay scattered on the floor, and I almost felt as if I had mangled the living flesh of a human being” (Novels 1: 152). Yet, up to this point, he’s adamantly tried to deny human status to the original creature. His apparently paradoxical behavior can be explained, I believe, by the fact that the female creature isn’t yet alive. In other words, its subjectivity exists only in his own mind. At the same time, it’s more than just another form of his own subjectivity. After all, recognition of Otherness can’t be so easily explained if the other is completely transparent. Instead, it seems more natural to suppose Victor present within a subjectivity he himself has created by an imaginative act. Hence his
regret after he destroys the female creature. If his existence in otherness formed part of his own subjectivity, his destruction of the female creature becomes an act of violence against himself. Meanwhile, other circumstances compel him to do it. Once animated, the female creature will obviously no longer permit the same sort of subjective possession as before. Rather, its real otherness will displace the subjective otherness imagined by its maker. To avoid the effects of that displacement, Victor has to eliminate what had previously formed a pretext for possession. His ability to brush aside any doubts about what he does points to the real motive behind his engagement in subjective otherness.  

Given the kind of relation Victor and his creature have, it’s only appropriate for the creature to get the last word. Throughout the novel, Victor’s tried to construct the subjectivity of the creature as a form of objectivity. For a brief period, nevertheless, it almost looks as if the creature might persuade his creator to recognize his subjectivity. The capstone, of course, would have been the creation of a female companion. When Victor fails to fulfill his promise, the narrative takes a critical turn. From now on, the creature can have no subjectivity other than that of Victor himself. Because of its self-awareness, no subjectivity can easily consent to become mere objectivity. Naturally, its first aim is to be recognized as a proper subjectivity. If denied that, its next move is to assimilate itself to the subjectivity by which it sought to be recognized. So when Victor destroys the female creature, he forces the original creature into a perpetual relation to himself. From now on, the creature can only haunt his creator constantly. In that way, the creature might hope to become a specter from whom Victor can never escape, and thereby merge with his creator’s subjectivity. The failure of that scheme takes up the end of the novel. As the creature himself puts it:

After the murder of Clerval, I returned to Switzerland, heart-broken and overcome. I pitied Frankenstein; my pity amounted to horror: I abhorred myself. But when I discovered that he, the author at once of my existence and of its unspeakable torments, dared to hope for happiness; that while he accumulated wretchedness and despair upon me, he sought his own enjoyment in feelings and passions from the indulgence of which I was for ever barred, then impotent envy and bitter indignation filled me with an insatiable thirst for vengeance. I recollected my threat, and resolved that it should be accomplished. I knew that I was preparing for myself a deadly torture; but I was the slave, not the master of an impulse, which I detested, yet could not disobey. Yet when she died! —nay, then I was not miserable. I had cast off all feeling, subdued all anguish to riot in the excess of my despair. Evil thenceforth became my good. Urged thus far, I had no choice but
to adapt my nature to an element which I had willingly chosen. The completion of my demoniacal design became an insatiable passion. And now it is ended.

(Novels 1: 168)

While he seems genuinely sorry about Clerval, we might wonder why the creature should feel “heart-broken and overcome.” To be “heart-broken” you have to have had a deep affection for someone now lost. Yet nowhere before does the creature display this sort of emotion for Clerval. What we do have is a warm mutual affection between Victor and Clerval. Given these circumstances, we might suppose the creature to identify with Victor and so vicariously experience what he imagines his creator must feel. And this would make sense if we assume that after his failure to get Victor to recognize his subjectivity the only recourse left to the creature is to assimilate himself completely to his creator’s subjectivity. Hence his description of himself as “overcome.” Normally, we depict ourselves as overcome by external forces. So Victor could describe himself, after the death of Clerval. For the creature to adopt such a posture, though, seems downright bizarre. Yet if we suppose him to identify with Victor, it all makes sense: although he commits the murder, it gives him no fulfillment subjectively. Indeed, one might even argue he commits it just so he can feel the same emotion as Victor.

In fact, his identification with Victor takes the creature to a paradoxical but logical extreme. As he himself puts it, “I pitied Frankenstein; my pity amounted to horror: I abhorred myself.” Take pity, here, in the sense Aristotle seems to give it in the Poetics: as a strong form of empathy. A pity that amounts to horror is clearly reminiscent of the way Aristotle associates pity and fear. But if Aristotle already hints at pity as a form of catharsis, the sort of pity felt by the creature pushes that tendency to its limit. While pity focuses on some external Other, a pity that amounts to horror wants to leave its own subjectivity behind altogether. So when the creature says, “I abhorred myself,” he means that subjectively he no longer has any desire to be himself. Instead, since he speaks of pity for Victor, his only desire is presumably to identify with his creator. Were he to persist, the result would be a permanent estrangement from himself. And on some level, no doubt, the creature wouldn’t mind a loss of self, provided he could still exist within some other subjectivity.5

But for that to happen, the subjectivity to which the creature attaches himself can’t form any other attachment. So when he discovers that his creator “dared to hope for happiness” and “sought his own enjoyment in feelings and passions from the indulgence of which I was for ever barred,” the creature reacts: “impo-
tent envy and bitter indignation filled me with an insatiable thirst for vengeance.” At first glance, his reaction may seem hard to explain. We might wonder, for instance, why he doesn’t simply feel regret or sadness. Or even a vicarious form of happiness (as for the De Laceys). To understand why neither is possible, we need to look more closely at the relationship between creature and creator. After Victor destroys the female creature, the creature murders Clerval in response. His motive, however, isn’t necessarily one of revenge only. In addition, the murder serves to reduce the number of intersubjective relationships open to Victor. Progressively isolated, he might eventually be forced into an exclusive relationship to the creature.

As a demonic presence, the creature forces himself on his creator. Hence his shock and resistance to any new attachment on Victor’s part. Demonic presences depend on subjective isolation: since the sense of otherness these presences convey is wholly contained within the consciousness they haunt, they constitute a creation of that consciousness. So the creature becomes a demonic presence for Victor because of his own obsession with the creature. Consequently, any attachment to an external Other (i.e., Elizabeth Lavenza) is bound to dispel that obsession. It forces subjectivity into a different kind of relationship, one not wholly contained within its own subjective element. Furthermore, since the creature’s already relinquished his own subjectivity, Victor’s attachment to Elizabeth would leave him without any recourse: he can’t go back to himself, nor can he impose himself anymore on his creator. The result would be the extinction of his subjectivity.

The fact that the creature has to recall his earlier threat (“I will be with you on your wedding-night”) is significant. It means he had forgotten all about it. But why? Presumably because when he uttered it, he had no idea Victor would want to marry. Conversely, Victor’s earlier lack of interest in marriage places the threat itself in a somewhat odd light. Without any explicit engagement, the threat could easily hint at a perpetual intimacy between creature and creator. Yet the hint of perpetual intimacy with his creator needn’t imply the creature plans to murder Elizabeth or anyone else at that point. And the fact that he has to “resolve” to do it suggests her murder wasn’t previously anticipated. Moreover, his remark that “I knew that I was preparing for myself a deadly torture” shows he’s acutely aware of how it will complicate his situation. The creature speaks of his murderous intent as “an impulse, which I detested, yet could not disobey.” An irrational impulse, it points to his first loss of self-control.

Although superficially similar, the two murders (of Elizabeth and the female creature) result from very different motives. Whereas the creature desperately
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wants his subjectivity to be recognized by Victor, the reverse isn’t at all true. On the contrary: as creator, Victor simply doesn’t need to be recognized by his creation. As he sees it, the murder of his spouse looks like an attempt to reduce him to the same level as the creature. Put in another way, it challenges his subjective autonomy. Consequently, Victor wants to destroy what he perceives as a threat to his own subjectivity.

Given his reluctance to kill Elizabeth, it’s odd that the creature feels no remorse after he does it. On this point, he explicitly says: “Yet when she died! — nay, then I was not miserable.” His reaction differs markedly from his regret about Clerval. The reason why the creature doesn’t feel anything about the death of Elizabeth is because he’s already lost the capacity to experience it subjectively, after his rebuff by Victor. Now, his only option is pure activity. As he himself puts it, “I had cast off all feeling, subdued all anguish to riot in the excess of my despair.” Intuitively, he realizes anguish is useless: he can’t meaningfully feel for himself (after his loss of subjective autonomy), nor can he feel for Victor (who wants to marry). Hence the impulse to “riot in the excess of my despair.” To riot is at least to act. “Evil thenceforth became my good,” he observes (cf. Milton’s Satan), presumably because evil or destruction is pure activity, whereas good requires concern for others and hence some form of intersubjectivity.

But the ultimate destructive act is to eliminate one’s creator. Up to this point, the creature has acted somewhat haphazardly. Even after Elizabeth’s murder, he can still say: “Urged thus far, I had no choice but to adapt my nature to an element which I had willingly chosen.” Once he manages to adapt, however, a significant change occurs. What had been a series of random acts now turns into a full-blown scheme of destructive activity. Given his rational tendency, it’s only natural for the creature to pursue a coherent scheme. To it, he can now devote all the emotion he had previously lavished on his efforts to be recognized as a subjectivity. Hence “the completion of my demoniacal design became an insatiable passion.” Its climax is, of course, the death of Victor. Beyond that point, what happens is more or less immaterial. As the creature himself admits: “And now it is ended.” His destructive scheme has become complete.

On a more general level, if the novel emphasizes how difficult it is to recognize an Other as a subjectivity, it doesn’t think we can solve this problem simply by use of a gender perspective. After all, Elizabeth isn’t any more concerned about the fate of Justine Moritz than Victor. Her only real concern is whether Justine’s innocent. But that has more to do with her assessment of Justine than with what might happen to her. In other words, she simply wants to know whether she was right about a character judgment. Arguably, it’s even worse that
she apparently has no regret about what happens to Justine after she learns of her innocence. So it all comes back, in the end, to self. Gender doesn’t save Elizabeth from subjectivity. From the standpoint of the novel, we all construct others objectively. And the source of our tendency to do that lies in the very way we exist. Which is to say: subjectively.\(^5\)

Even rationality can’t save us from subjective blindness. When he makes his appeal to Victor, the creature deliberately elects to frame it in a rational way. Clearly, Victor himself had made no effort to be rational when he first spoke. For that reason, the use of rational argument might seem like a good move, to get him out of his wholly subjective viewpoint. In fact, however, it turns out to be a mistake. By his recourse to rationality, the creature allows his creator to blunt the force of his request. Rationality, after all, is a kind of game. You can use it to make a particular point. But, by the same token, you can also use it to assert the contrary. Once the creature elects to put his appeal in a rational way, he gives Victor a chance to show how he can justifiably reject that appeal, in a way that appears equally rational. Because the creature restricts his appeal solely to the rational, his creator can avoid the crucial fact, which is that of another subjectivity. Instead, by his willingness to play the rational game, Victor can even pretend to himself that he’s seriously considered the appeal.

For Shelley, then, the real question is why we feel compelled to objectify another subjectivity. To answer that question, we need, as she sees it, to look at our relation to the external world in general. By means of consciousness or subjectivity, we perceive the activity of external forces. From the outset, however, perception isn’t neutral. Instead, we feel the urgency of it: all those external forces, by their constant activity, act on the mind, put pressure on it. So the source of our need to objectify comes from the way we feel that pressure. We objectify, in other words, as a means to avoid complete submission to external forces. Without some theory of the external, we’d simply succumb to it, through intellectual passivity. Hence the rationale for a theory of the external. In this fashion, we hope to gain some control over the chaos of external forces that act on the mind. Conversely, the absence of theory would seem to imply passivity to external forces, consequently chaos and, as a result, loss of mental stability. Thus it isn’t by accident that Victor happens to be a student of the natural sciences. Only by means of the natural sciences can we possibly hope to arrive at a theory of all the external forces whose activity we perceive.

At the same time, it would be a mistake to read what happens in the novel primarily as a comment on the natural sciences.\(^7\) Nowhere, after all, does the text go into Victor’s work in any detail. The few hints we do get seem merely
suggestive, at best. Nor does Victor ever really display much curiosity about natural phenomena. In fact, he himself says that his interest in the natural sciences grew out of his passion for the occult: what he read about in the works of Cornelius Agrippa, and others. Which is to say: an interest in power over nature, rather than nature. Similarly, his attempt to create a creature is defined from the start within a wholly subjective framework. For Victor, then, the natural sciences are only a means to an end. From his study of the sciences, he discovers the power of theory, its ability to dominate external nature by the way it can abstract and generalize. Ironically, though, that capacity to abstract and generalize is precisely what makes it difficult, if not impossible, for theory to appreciate nature in its specificity. Yet Victor doesn’t even care about the sort of generality we get from theory. His relation to the sciences, and ultimately to theory, is simply one of use. What Victor wants is the power over nature that theory can give.

But if theory is what saves us from chaos, it also opens us up at the same time to an equally significant danger: the absence of intersubjectivity. Precisely because we formulate a theory of the external, we preclude a knowledge of what it really consists of. Ultimately, theory isn’t about knowledge. When we do theory, we don’t simply try to glean knowledge from our experiences. Instead, we conceptualize those experiences. Which is to say: we move from experiences to concepts. In our experiences, we take in the activity of external forces. In our concepts, we give free play to the mind only. Finally, then, theory is about the primacy of the mind over external forces. For that reason, the perfect figure for theory is the dream: in our dreams, all the pressure that external forces exert is at one remove. Meanwhile, the mind is at liberty to arrange all the stuff of our experiences freely. So Victor sleeps after his experiment, in the hope that he can dream his way back to pure subjectivity and hence to theory. And if he could do that, his dream would then be the dream of science or theory: that mind were able by itself to create the world. Yet if it were able to do that, it would only have cut itself off from a genuine knowledge of any external force or agency. And that, in turn, would mean the lack of any genuine knowledge of others, and so of any possible relationship, or intersubjectivity.

Intersubjectivity, however, is precisely what we’re afraid of. As a result, the particular form of subjective/objective tension that we find between Victor and his creature isn’t quite like that of Hegel (lordship/bondage) or others. As Shelley sees it, we objectify others not only from desire but also from fear. So theory, you might say, conveys the dream of subjectivity in a double sense: as a form of wish-fulfillment but also and equally by the way it tries to manage our anxiety. We do theory, in other words, in order to avoid intersubjectivity. To
conceptualize or objectify the other, then, isn’t about a power over some other that you can feel. Instead, we get into theory precisely so we don’t have to feel the other in its otherness, its presence. Because of its abstractness, theory is different from other ways we might use to objectify. Unlike these, theory, for Shelley, is pure reflexivity: it all comes back to the self. For that reason, she repeatedly adverts to the dream as an image or motif for theory. If dreams betray anxiety, they also try to resolve it by the way they represent its sources, so that these become in effect no longer some form of otherness but rather one of pure self-reflexivity. And so, Shelley seems to say, for theory.

Beyond theory, finally, there was, for the author of *Frankenstein*, one other option. If you could somehow manage to resist the temptation to theory, you could at least speculate about what might otherwise be. And its indispensable condition would be intersubjectivity. Rather than try to draw all our experiences into a conceptual framework, we could simply take them for what they were. In that way, we might hope to give our experiences a more natural shape, without theory. For the novel, it could lead to a different kind of relationship between creature and creator, and so, perhaps, a genuine intersubjectivity. Of course, the text doesn’t really show us what it would look like. It would have to take a form very different from that of the subjective dynamic that governs the narrative. Of all this, the author gives us only a glimpse, by her use of the term “sympathy.” But that, as a later author says, would be another story.