A Troubled Legacy: 
Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*
and the Inheritance of Human Rights

*Hence the distinction between things possible and actual is such that it holds merely subjectively, for human understanding. For even if something does not exist, we can still have it in our thoughts; or we can present something as given, even though we have as yet no concept of it.*

—Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*

*As I said this I suddenly beheld the figure of a man, at some distance, advancing towards me with superhuman speed. He bounded over the crevices in the ice among which I had walked with caution.*

—Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

Since it first appeared in 1818, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* has been variously regarded as a repudiation of Enlightenment projects for political liberation, as an incendiary extension of them, or as the record of a vexed ambivalence with respect to notions of progress in general. Having long since passed into the status of modern myth, the novel becomes uncannily evocative, not only through its imagining of the reanimation of lifeless matter but also through its tripping of a series of paradoxes inherent to arguments on natural rights in the eighteenth century. Neither an endorsement nor rejection of Enlightenment, the novel works as the instantiation of a critical dilemma for attributions of the human proceeding from Enlightenment.

In Kant’s ethics, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s politics, and in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* (1789/1793), the identity of the “human” is split. *Frankenstein*’s staging of the nonhumaness of Shelley’s unnamed daemon contrasts with the split in the fundamental category of the “human” to be observed in this series of pivotal philosophical and political “doubles.” The monster’s peculiar relationship to acceding to a social form of existence thus brings to light an impasse...
faced by political subjects in eighteenth-century philosophy and allows for a new reading of them. Shelley’s monster, that “figure of a man,” moves across the shifting terrain of his own indetermination at “superhuman speed”; traversing the slash between man/citizen, reasoner/human, general/individual will in ways that pose a delicate challenge to the work of reason in Enlightenment projects for a new authorization of law.3

Frankenstein presents the coming-into-being and embodiment of the daemon as a narrative challenge. The animation of the monster makes up both the content and the formal principle of the narrative. In her retrospective “Author’s Introduction” to the 1831 edition of Frankenstein, Shelley draws a sharp distinction between “the radiance of brilliant imagery” and the “machinery of a story.” Emphasizing the cathexis not of a single image but of a succession of them, she identifies concatenation as the significant factor in the form.4 When she narrates the arrival of the vision at the center of her story, Shelley recapitulates the principle incidents of the first half of the novel, stopping at the point at which “the hideous phantasm of a man” opens the curtain and looks at his maker with “yellow, watery, but speculative eyes.” The process of his assemblage and animation are depicted as forming an inexorable chain of events that culminates in the dramatic encounter of monster and maker, a scene that increasingly consumes the novel’s plot and has its first reprise in the speech on Mont Blanc in which the daemon declares “his right” to the society of a companion, indeed to society itself. A crisis of succession thus forms the dramatic core of the novel: autonomy succeeds upon production and paradoxically sets a relentless mechanism of plot into motion, leading ultimately to the crisis of a disputed inheritance. The nonhuman monster seeks to inherit the rights of man and the citizen from his progenitor.

In her own narrative construction of the logic of an origin within this almost machinic impetus of the plot, Shelley plays on the role of origin stories in Enlightenment treatments of natural law. Though childhood had already been invented by the time Frankenstein appeared, the monster notably lacks one. His “upbringing” instead reads like a variation on eighteenth-century “philosophical fictions.” In his recitation of his life, he charts his cognitive progress, in a Lockean vein, moving from pure unsorted sense perception, to the formation of ideas, and eventually to the attainment of literacy.5 This trajectory closely resembles various midcentury speculations on the early development of spoken and written language, although the monster attains to expression and then to language in an eccentric and historically complex way. His “origin narrative” is recounted retrospectively in a subsequently formed first-person, experiential and subjective, and takes place not prior to but contemporaneous with the history of the European present.6 He originates in Rousseau’s Geneva and introduces interesting problems into it, for when the monster does appropriate the capacity for “human” speech, he almost immediately uses the capacity to narrate a history and voice a demand. The demand he voices is a rights-based claim upon a community (by way of a companion or mate). Even more inter-
estingly, its first utterance comes in terms of a “requisition.” The narration of the events of his life and his development have all been a prelude to the voicing of this demand with which he concludes his narrative:

“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.”  

By demanding that another of “his species” be produced, the monster announces himself as member of a species, though he importantly lacks the requisite other members. The monster demands, in the name of community, that he be provided with not only a companion but also one of the formal preconditions of his status as member of a species—that there be others. In producing the second, the Doctor will effectively create the first as species. The possibility of reproduction in the new species, attendant upon this act, however, escalates the calamity of the monster’s being such that he would not only systematically destroy all the Doctor loves but also represent a threat to mankind itself and a peril to the human community—as the Doctor puts it, a desolation of the “world” (412).

Shelley introduces a chapter break between the requisition with which the monster ends his autobiographical narrative and the declaration he voices. The monster’s long narrative thus cedes in chapter 17 to a dramatic dialogue between monster and maker and then restores the narrator’s position to Dr. Frankenstein. Here is the monster’s declaration as reported later by him:

The being finished speaking and fixed his looks upon me in the expectation of a reply. But I was bewildered, perplexed, and unable to arrange my ideas sufficiently to understand the full extent of his proposition. He continued, “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 to concede.” (412)

The Doctor begins this chapter by naming the monster a “being” instead of a “daemon,” and one wonders if this might be an effect of the light of reason cast by what Shelley has the daemon term his “proposition.” It is not reason, however, that renders the Doctor pliable but rather the quality of the story; “anger . . . had died away while he narrated his peaceful life among the cottagers” (412). The pastoral scene of the monster’s education and surreptitious initiation into human society allows the “being” to become an object worthy of sympathy: precisely the feeling he demands to be at liberty to share and the signature sentiment of the epistolary frame. The proposition that concludes the narration, however, produces uncontrolable rage. Dr. Frankenstein recounts, “and as he said this I could no longer suppress the rage that burned within me” (412). The sympathy inspired by what one might construe as the result of an identification produced by sentimental readership cannot sustain the logical consequence that the monster would draw from it, that is, his
claim on the right to community—the positive freedom of a right to the exchange of sympathies with “one of his own species.” This claim, the monster believes, follows as a consequence of his tale, but it inspires fear and loathing in his creator, who, despite his sympathy, refuses the analogy to the rights of the citizen and, indeed, regards that analogy as a biological threat to mankind.

**Doubling Geneva, or**  
**Is Frankenstein’s Monster a Kantian?**

The monster’s narration of his “origins” and its culminating in his proposition suggest Rousseau’s *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes* as an intertext for Shelley’s novel. The monster’s additional reference to traveling to the “wilds of South America” with his future mate further reinforces this connection (413). Just as Rousseau’s second *Discourse* resorts to tracing the history of “la vie de ton espèce [homme]” to account for the origin of inequality among men and determine if it is “authorized” by natural law, the monster’s gradual acquisition of language and the trajectory of his development provide a standard by which to measure the justice of the daemon’s claim. Like Rousseau’s early man, the monster demonstrates an innate “pity” in the first phases of his interaction with man. His initial impulse is only clouded and obscured by the brutal and incomprehending responses with which this species of man responds to the product of the Doctor’s laboratory. This line of development parallels the “progress” of reason in history charted by Rousseau in the second *Discourse*. Reason distorts the initial “sensibility” of man, which Rousseau affirms as prior to it. Let us recall Rousseau’s terms for a moment:

and meditating on the first and simplest operations of the human Soul, I believe I perceive in it two principles prior to reason, of which one interests us intensely in our well-being and our self-preservation, and the other inspires in us a natural repugnance at seeing any sentient Being [être sensible], and especially any being like ourselves [nos semblables], perish or suffer. It is from the association and combination which our mind is capable of making between these two Principles, without it being necessary to introduce into it that of sociability, that all the rules of natural right seem to me to flow; rules which reason is subsequently forced to reestablish on different foundations when, by its successive developments, it has succeeded [elle est venue à bout] in smothering nature.9

This “sensibility,” which predates reason and obviates the need to posit “sociability,” provides the standard in Rousseau’s second *Discourse* whereby the distance from a better and original nature of man can be gauged. It further proposes a model for the recuperation of this better nature through the establishment of “other foundations.” 10 Reason, then, is set the task in the discourse of reestablishing, through its own methods, a prior state of affairs that the very progress of reason, as Rousseau maintains, has destroyed.
The monster’s narration of his history closely follows the Rousseauvian argument. He addresses his tale to the Doctor as a kind of testimony and insists that it be heard in the name of his original constitution: “By the virtues that I once possessed, I demand this from you. Hear my tale” (365). Pity is only extinguished in the monster, an initially sympathetic observer of human activity, by the misrecognition of his resemblance to “man”—his own original pity. This introductory passage turns, meanwhile, on precisely that point in the passage just cited from Rousseau that will exclude the daemon from “nature.” He does not sufficiently resemble his creator to sustain the sympathy that he hopes to elicit. What follows is Dr. Frankenstein’s response to the being’s request for a hearing and, in turn, the monster’s response to it.

“Why do you call to my remembrance,” I rejoined, “circumstances of which I shudder to reflect, that I have been the miserable origin and author? Cursed be the day, abhorred devil, in which you first saw light! Cursed (although I curse myself) be the hands that formed you! You have made me wretched beyond expression. You have left me no power to consider whether I am just to you or not. Begone! Relieve me from the sight of your detested form.”

“Thus I relieve thee, my creator,” he said, and placed his hated hands before my eyes, which I flung from me with violence; “thus I take from thee a sight which you abhor. Still thou canst listen to me and grant me thy compassion.” (365)

Though the monster proves himself to share in that fundamental “sensibility” of man Rousseau describes, the limitations of the human senses bar his access to justice. Throwing his hand over the Doctor’s eyes, he ironizes the possibility of a “blind” justice and literalizes the figure of a “hearing.” The shift provided by Rousseau’s introduction of “sensibility” as a foundation for natural law—“It appears, in effect, that if I am obliged to do no harm to my kind [semblable], it is less because he is a reasonable being [être raisonnable] than because he is a sensible being [être sensible] . . .”—still excludes the monster, possessed of reason and sensibility, who cannot attain to the status as “un semblable” (162).

Here we encounter the problem of identity between Doctor and monster. While the Doctor and monster double one another, they also prove, in the overlapping of their positions, to be no longer identical to themselves. The work of the Doctor’s hands (the creation of this ranging, destructive other) has alienated him from himself and his authorship and from the site of this alienation, he lacks the “power”—of either sensibility or reason—to judge the monster’s request. The fact that his narration can move the Doctor allows the monster some footing in the Rousseauvian fiction concerning the life of the human species. However, the final step, whereby the intervention of reason would restore the lost innocence of sensibility, is roundly refused the monster by the Doctor’s response to the very thought. He will not grant the monster his right to a community, either as social or species being. Neither “reason” nor “sensibility” will suffice, and Shelley’s narrative underlines, as does Rousseau’s second Discourse, the priority of the “semblable” even to the “sensi-
ble” in this struggle for recognition. Further, their failed resemblance to one another having destroyed their access to an original sensibility, the daemon and Doctor mutually destroy one another’s self-identity.

The particularity of their connection to one another—never to be sufficiently defined as one of mirroring because it is precisely a product of labor or act of reproduction that is at stake—nullifies their abstract and equal value before what Rousseau might propose as reason’s intervention in the history of civilization. The Doctor takes on the “cause of mankind” as the human who stands between the daemon and the final enunciation of the daemon’s being. Interestingly, it is, in the last instance, the Doctor’s incapacity and subsequent, active refusal of the monster’s proposition that causes the monster’s failure to be “un semblable.”

“I do refuse it,” I replied; “and no torture shall ever extort a consent from me. You may render me the most miserable of men, but you shall never make me base in my own eyes. Shall I create another like yourself, whose joint wickedness might desolate the world? Be-gone! I have answered you; you may torture me, but I will never consent.” (412)

The monster should by all rights inherit the rights of man and the citizen: he is possessed of sensibility and can reason on his own behalf. By virtue of both of these capacities he becomes able to voice a claim. It is precisely the voicing of his particular claim, however, that leads directly to the paranoid escalation of the Doctor’s response, that is, Dr. Frankenstein’s fear that the monster will also “inherit the earth” and threaten the common good of mankind. The monster’s projected social being is precisely what Dr. Frankenstein has come to regard as a direct threat to his own. This escalated threat of the monster’s species-being drives the Doctor to desire to murder his creation genocidally. It is not the daemon alone whom the Doctor must destroy but his race, and this race, in turn, would already come into conceptual being through any acknowledgment of the claim that the monster voices. His claim on justice therefore persists, thereafter, and as we shall see it is this justice that haunts Dr. Frankenstein.

While it is true that the monster’s narrative also details the development and history of his criminality, a contradiction emerges precisely because he cannot be recognized by the law:

“The guilty are allowed, by human laws, bloody as they are, to speak in their own defence before they are condemned. Listen to me Frankenstein. You accuse me of murder, and yet you would, with a satisfied conscience, destroy your own creature. Oh, praise the eternal justice of man! Yet I ask you not to spare me, and then if you can, and if you will, destroy the work of your hands.” (365)

The being says that he is “content to reason” (412), and as he reasons, he finds himself to be outside of the protection of the law: though a murderer subject to “human laws,” the destruction of his own being would not be comprehended as
murder under those same laws. (The monster is satisfyingly sarcastic on this point.) Notably, the daemon names the laws as specifically human, and through a confusion of modification, the line could also be understood to mean that it is not necessarily the guilty but potentially also the laws that are bloody. The daemon’s drama immediately emphasizes the fact that the laws that can only identify him as a perpetrator, but not as a victim, apply to embodied subjects; beyond that they apply specifically to human bodies, the humanly embodied subject. It is not the dictates of reason but the limitations of the empirically human that debar the daemon’s recognition before the law.

The monster’s accentuation of the human embodiment upon which the laws of Geneva are contingent raises a question of justice. His demand sets the ethical tasks of reason in relief against the anthropological determination of the reasoners themselves. In this the monster turns out to be a good Kantian through circumstance; that is, by being forced, by virtue of his very embodiment, to draw a fine distinction between “pure moral philosophy” and “anthropology.” Indeed, the being-product might fare better if viewed in the light of Kantian ethics, for Kant’s investigation of the existence of pure practical reason obliges him to eliminate the empirical—and with it the human—from the ultimate articulation of the moral law. This necessity functions as both the endpoint and prerequisite of Kantian ethics.

This, then, is the first question: Is pure reason sufficient of itself to determine the will, or is it only as empirically conditioned that it can so? At this point there appears a concept of causality which is justified by the Critique of Pure Reason, though subject to no empirical exhibition. That is the concept of freedom, and if we can now discover means to show that freedom does in fact belong to the human will (and thus to the will of all rational beings), then it will have been proved not only that pure reason can be practical but also that it alone, and not the empirically conditioned reason, is unconditionally practical.

Paradoxically, Kant’s attempt to show that the causality of freedom belongs to the human will necessitates that the human under consideration be shorn of all empirical attributes and be generalized beyond the human itself. That is, according to Kant, freedom must belong to all rational beings. Who are they? No further elucidation is proffered, and the discussion attends to the question of principles.

For Kant, principles must be proven to be possessed of objective necessity and therefore must be “known a priori” (prior to any empirical testing) in order to qualify as “laws.” Objectivity must be distinguished from universality when determining whether a given principle can be understood as a law. This is why the pursuit of happiness cannot be a law: though universal, it is nevertheless subjectively and empirically determined. To operate as a law, a practical principle must include the human under a wider objective rubric of necessity that can only be vouched for by reason’s evidence unto itself. This also explains why the hallmark of the law is its pure formality. Kant reiterates the importance of this simultaneous narrowing and widening of the aperture in the Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals:
Since my purpose here is directed to moral philosophy [sittliche Weltweisheit], I narrow my proposed question to this: Is it not of the utmost necessity to construct a pure moral philosophy which is completely freed [gesa¨ubert] from everything which may be only empirical [nur empirisch heißen mag] and thus belong to anthropology?215

Responding on a fundamental level to the new disciplines in the human sciences—comparative law, in this case—developed in the earlier part of the century (for instance, by Montesquieu), Kantian ethics turn roundly away from the efforts of an empiricist universalism.16 As Louis Althusser remarks with respect to Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of the Laws*,

The project of constituting a science of politics and history presupposes first of all that politics and history can be the object of a science, i.e., that they contain a necessity which the science can hope to discover.17

Kantian ethics takes a diametrically opposite approach, turning from politics and history to the necessity that can be demonstrated in the conceptual realm of freedom, to a formal rather than determinate ethics. Instead of seeking out necessity sufficient to the formation of an object of knowledge within the chaos of accumulated facts, Kant frames the highest ethical imperative (understood as the pursuit of “law”) in terms of establishing a necessity prior to the facts, a necessity argued to be inherent to reason.

In order to avoid the contagion of the “pathologically determined” faculty of desire in this conjectured “higher faculty of desire,” Kant in essence returns the question of human law to a speculative, prior stage, insisting that the critique of practical reason be analogous to mathematics. This analogy is based on the conviction that the empirical will “degrade” the demonstration.18

Then only is reason a truly higher faculty of desire, but still only in so far as it determines the will by itself and not in the service of the inclinations. Subordinate to reason as the higher faculty of desire is the pathologically determinable faculty of desire, the latter being really and in kind different from the former, so that even the slightest admixture of impulses impairs the strength and superiority of reason, just as taking anything empirical as the condition of a mathematical demonstration would degrade and destroy [herabsetzt und vernichtet] its force and value.19

If anything, the spectacle of Mary Shelley’s man-made, animate product declaring his rights amid the rigorous sublimities of Mont Blanc would seem to approach a “degraded and blasted demonstration.” And yet, because the monster falls outside of the category of the strictly anthropological, his existence becomes, by default, an instance—a problematically intransigent example—of another, differently embodied rational creature.

The novel *Frankenstein*, in essence, startlingly and abruptly responds to the previously posed question: Who are these other rational, finite beings? Let us recall Kant:

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Everyone must admit that a law [ein Gesetz], if it is to hold morally (i.e., as a ground of obligation), must imply absolute necessity; he must admit that the command: thou shalt not lie, does not apply to men only as if other rational beings had no need to observe it. The same is true for all other moral laws properly so called. He must concede that the ground of obligation here must not be sought in the nature of man or in the circumstances in which he is placed [gesetzt].

The presentation of the argument moves from an assumed consensus ("jedermann muß eingestehen") to the assertion of a critical requirement that moral laws, to be binding, must find their foundations beyond this consensus in the strictures of reason. As we shall see, these shall be laid out in terms of the formal conditioning of a "law," which I will consider as reason’s relation to itself. The bindingness of law does not reside in its humanness, nor even in its empirical circumstances—the world into which people are set [gesetzt] does not, in fact, ground the way in which they are set up in the law [Gesetz].

In one sense, the humans who observe the law also witness the law’s formal determination of itself and are outside of it, though simultaneously under it. The humans gather to witness this self-evidence of reason, but with the monster unleashed in Geneva, their witnessing itself is also disturbingly observed. The reader recalls Shelley’s description of her first semiconscious production (“I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think”) of the story from the “Author’s Introduction”:

[The Doctor] sleeps; but he is awakened; he opens his eyes; behold, the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening the curtains and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes. (263–64)

If the humans gather to witness the relationship of reason to itself, the monster at large in Geneva uncannily shadows and witnesses this scene.

In Kant’s ethics, the problem of an unexplored species difference is preferred to the problem of cultural or historical difference. The vagaries of interhuman differences are drawn into shadow by the umbrella concept of “the empirical.” Though refusing any assertion of transcendence outside the limits of reason, Kant also refuses to anchor the principle of law in anthropological universalism. While this move to the a priori jurisdiction of reason would appear to skirt the political, it can also be brought into the service of a proleptic affirmation thereof. The daemon of Shelley’s Frankenstein, in declaring his rights as a member of another reasoning species, accepts the challenge of objective moral necessity and makes it political.

If the novel Frankenstein inaugurates “science fiction,” this is partly because it forces a proviso of a priori knowledge (that is, that freedom must necessarily belong to all rational beings) onto a kind of road test. Shelley’s fiction presents a being adequate to the category of the “reasoning nonhuman”—the countercategory that provides the background for reason’s self-evidence in Kant’s ethics—and follows its (narrative) progress. In this sense, the novel sets up a kind of aftermath of the
a priori because the daemon, when he comes alive, is subject to the reign of consequences, the succession of incidents, the necessities of existence. Thus, the hulking figure moves from the background of a given, formal condition of the ethical law (Sittengesetz) onto the scene of the law’s operation. Once participation in the Sittengesetz of the categorical imperative, the law of freedom, is voiced as a claim by the daemon, it leaves its initial formality as established in the second Critique by theorem 3 and moves into its perhaps unintended and unexpected use. Let us recall theorem 3:

If a rational being can think [denken soll] of his maxims as practical universal laws, he can do so only by considering them as principles which contain the determining grounds of the will because of their form and not because of their matter.23 (emphasis mine)

The universal objective law in Kant is powerfully formal and empty. The categorical imperative gives the form and that form is necessarily “identical and self-evident [für sich klar].” The principle of noncontradiction assures the jurisdiction of practical reason on formal grounds and offers anchoring in the a priori.

The will is thought of as independent of empirical conditions and consequently as pure will, determined by the mere form of law, and this ground of determination is regarded as the supreme condition of all maxims.24

Practical reason gives the form of the universal law and “determines the will a priori only with respect to the form of its maxims” (31). It demands that any maxim of the individual will “could always hold at the same time as the principle giving universal law” (30). It sets up, in other words, the hypothetical limiting condition that the individual will must participate in the universal giving of law. (Here we have come very close to the principle of noncontradiction that undergirds the thinking of Rousseau’s general will.) This is made clear by virtue of the necessary form that each maxim takes. How then does the daemon’s demand measure up with respect to Kantian maxim-testing?

The problem with Shelley’s monster is that the demand he makes—based on his participation in the inherent freedom of reasoning beings—is that he be given a community. The “nature” of this demand unfortunately for him entails the possibility that he become capable of reproduction. His claim, however, which I understand as a “politicization” of the critique of pure practical reason, lands the monster immediately at the crux of an unsustainable contradiction. While the monster or daemon is a reasoning being, what he demands from his participation in the community of reasoning beings is notably doubly empirical, because it follows along the lines of the “pursuit of happiness” (a subjective, if universal, grounding of a will’s determination) and because it threatens to produce as its consequence a crisis of proliferation of material, alien forms, that is, a competing sphere of contingency in the precincts of the human.

The unnamed daemon demands the right to his species-being—not only “to
be” a species, but also paradoxically, to “become” one—which, at the moment of the declaration, is the same as producing one. In a community of reason with the human reasoners he asks to reassert his species-difference therefrom, by requisitioning his own alien community of reason. The production of these others, though utterly assimilable in the context of empirical cataloging, complicates the purity of the formal rule of law by its relationship to embodiment and proliferation. The monster thus moves from playing a potential role in grounding a demonstrable transhuman category to exiling himself from the ethics of pure practical reason because of his kind of embodiment and its unprecedented conditions.

As mentioned parenthetically earlier, when viewed from one perspective, the different mechanisms for rendering the operation of the law nonarbitrary and necessary have, in both the case of Kant’s categorical imperative and Rousseau’s general will, the result of necessarily aligning the individual will to a more general faculty of “volition.” We have considered the case in terms of the formal structure of the categorical imperative. How will it appear with reference to the general will?

Shelley’s daemon, when making a demand for a community, is in the unique position—conspicuously parallel to the hypothetical regions of Rousseau’s social contract—of needing to establish his participation in the general before attending to his being as the particular. The monster is (diegetically) unequivocally empirical, although his being (but not his existence) can be argued in another sense to be the supplement—the possible/potential other, finite reasoning being possessed of will—that grounds the objective universality of the law for Kant. By insisting that he be granted the rights attendant to human freedom, however, the daemon emphasizes and corporeally reiterates the disavowed physicality of the political subject of the Enlightenment and signals toward the “private sphere” of female nonsubjects, slaves, and servants (what might be loosely characterized as the reproductive or economically conditioned social sphere), which renders this subject possible. The formal conflation of the particular and general will is literally collapsed in the monster’s body, which lacks the maintenance of a “private sphere,” rendering him the perfect, supernumerary embodiment of a political fiction. The record of his criminality aside, the monster is not a viable subject largely because of his peculiar relation to the disavowed “givenness” of the existence of social groups and sexual dominance in eighteenth-century political fictions and political reason.

Interestingly enough, what is for Dr. Frankenstein the grotesque impossibility of the monster’s demand points to what Althusser calls “the first encounter with a real problem” in Rousseau’s Social Contract, that is, the existence of particular interest groups. I recall here Althusser’s argument. In the chain of discrepancies he pursues through Rousseau’s articulation of the social contract, each décalage is occasioned by an explanatory strategy marked by the phrase “so to speak.” In the last discrepancy “particular interest” is the locus of the play on words or the pivotal double entendre. “Particular interest,” Althusser argues, is what Rousseau terms both the interest of the individual in isolation and that of a particular social group.
This double usage allows for the inclusion of a total contradiction. It causes the particular interest to be both the essence and the obstacle to the general interest because the existence of “partial societies” is said to inhibit the general interest from expressing itself. 27 The mirroring relation between the particular and general interest is thus, to follow Althusser’s argument, predicated upon the exclusion of social groups. These same remain, nonetheless, an insurmountable fact of politics. 28

The monster’s peculiar relationship to the possibility of acceding to a social form of being and the question of progeneration, which accompanies this possibility, also point to this décalage investigated in Althusser’s study of Rousseau. Within the matrix of Shelley’s novel, the monster is not just the sad outsider famous to twentieth-century viewers from the cinema of James Whale. Rather, he represents a particular interest literally cut loose from any particular interest group and striving to produce one. His existence thus amounts to a total collapse of the difference between particular and general and results in a quest for the elided second usage of the term “particular interest.” In this he impossibly embodies or figures the slip between the two uses of particular interest in Rousseau’s exposition of the social contract. He is an alien but in a remarkably human way, which is to say that he is excluded from the human in general because of his relation to a group—a group that does not yet exist.

The monster’s registration of the problem of the group thus functions as a negative index. It’s true that the point is that he conspicuously lacks a group, but, as I have argued, it is precisely his attempt to invoke a just cause and requisition a companion that obliterates his relation to the community of reason. He claims that his existence (as opposed to the potential of his being) is impossible alone, but the demand for a community, which he makes in declaring his rights, is conflated with a nascent total destruction of humankind. This problem shows him again in the light of a mutant growth or shadowy presence at the scene of reason’s activity. Hence my motive for reading Shelley’s novel against the philosophical strategy of double attributions of the human in the Enlightenment and for reading these strategies through it. The figure of the monster’s embodiment shadows the work of reason whether that be its self-evidence (providing the form of the law) as in Kant, its intervention in the progress of inequality in history as in Rousseau’s second Discourse, or its provision of the field of operations that theorizes the social contract.

In the case of the social contract, one might argue that the monster is a grotesque form that emerges from what Althusser calls the “working order of the mirror categories of particular and general interest.” 29 His need interrupts the purely formal designation of the particular and general wills by insisting upon the inescapability of the social group. This aspect of his need makes him a persistently relevant figure in a number of current debates; those, for instance on the status of the “enemy combatant” or protections against discrimination on the basis of sexual choice. My reading of Shelley’s novel could invite the reproach that it overemphasizes the role of social groups with regard to cultural and biological reproduction.
at the expense of the novel’s sentimental content. It is true that in their tone and content, the monster’s passionate outbursts more closely echo Rousseau’s *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* than they do the rhetorical hairpin turns of *The Social Contract*. Consider, for example, the opening “Promenade” of the *Reveries*:

Me voici donc seul sur la terre, n’ayant plus de frère, de prochain, d’amis, de société que moi-même. Le plus sociable et le plus aimant des humains en a été proscrit par un accord unanime. Ils ont cherché dans les raffinements de leur haine quel tourment pouvait être le plus cruel à mon âme sensible, et ils ont brisé violemment tous les liens qui m’attachaient à eux. J’aurais aimé les hommes en dépit d’eux-mêmes.30

In myriad instances, both the daemon and his producer could be ventriloquizing the lines of Rousseau’s great autobiographical text—remembering that *Frankenstein* also comprises a series of autobiographies.31 And truly, the monster’s declared “claim” and “requisition” are borne upon the exquisite agony that is his loneliness, his marvelously emotional, pathological, and criminal being. Nonetheless, the question remains as to why the anguished cry of the monster comes forth in such tight allusion to the Enlightenment texts championing the project of freedom; why the monster’s hideous and outcast status is constantly emphasized in the novel in terms of its *singleness*; and why, ultimately, the demand to which these eventualities force the daemon results in the horrifying vision of the reproduction of an alien “species,” a “race of evils” (435). In turning to the implications of the particular “chains” of incidents concatenated in Shelley’s novel, my goal is not to overlook the resonances of sentimentality in the novel but to remain attentive to this resonance’s inescapably *political* dimension.32 The Doctor claims that it is in the general interests of mankind that the daemon not become the subject of a just claim, the consequences of which would jeopardize the well-being of the whole. The monster’s aim is not to form a “particular interest group,” however, the determining factors of his “existence” make this unavoidable for him. Thus, let us consider them at further length.

The alarming narrative of the monster “coming-into-being” speaks precisely to the problem of declared existences and the issue of their purity or formal emptiness. Let us consider Althusser’s contention in detail:

The general interest: its existence has as its sole content *the declaration of its existence*. . . . The same is true, in mirror form, for the particular interest. For, the general interest is no more than the mirror reflection of the particular interest. The particular interest, too, is the object of an absolute *declaration of existence*. The two declarations echo one another since they concern the same content and fulfill the same function. And they are discrepant with respect to the same reality: the interests of social groups, the object of a denigration indispensable for the maintenance in working order of the mirror categories of particular interest and general interest. Just as the general interest is a myth, whose nature is visible once it is seen in demarcation from its real double, the “general interests” which Rousseau calls “particular” because they belong to human groups (orders, classes, etc.)—so the “pure” particular interest of the isolated individual (what he obtains from the constitutive origins of the state of
nature) is a myth, whose nature is visible once it is seen that it has a real “double” in the
general interests of human groups that Rousseau calls “particular” because they dominate
the State, or struggle for the conquest of its power.33

The monster represents an existence more verisimilar than the mutually reflecting
myths of the general and particular interests Althusser delineates. By actually em-
bodying their collapse into one another, the daemon exposes their status as myth
in his fantastic figure. By synchronizing in one body the relay of their identity, he
demonstrates their impossibility (he cannot live, he says, without another). His di-
lemma and corresponding demand stand in, to use Althusser’s words, not as a “fact
of Reason, but a simple irreducible fact.”34 Put differently, the monster is a fictional
character whose specific conditions body forth the myth exposed by Althusser by
offering a literal incarnation of the impossible, but formally necessary, theorization
of the social contract. In this, his story does indeed become a “myth made visible”—one that plays through and exposes the fallacy of the foundations of an unme-
diated identity between the purely general and the purely particular. The monster’s
idea of escaping to the wilds of Brazil takes on an especially sardonic cast in this
light, as his remove to these environs will better support the mythic framework onto
which the natural man had been painted as zero hour of historical man—that is,
as a projection from the future.

**Bride of Frankenstein**

The refusal the daemon receives from the community of man drives the
narrative sequence to its next necessity: a requisitioned female. In a manner compa-
rable to the intricacy of the Doctor’s and the daemon’s alienating identification with
each other, the possibility of the new female daemon threatens excess and crisis.
The projected female daemon introduces both the problem of sex/reproduction/
genre and a contradictory redoubling of the fiction itself. It would seem that the
climax occasioned by including a “female” within the frame of a voiced political
demand pushes the fiction into ever less sustainable reaches of the probable. To this
attenuated probability, perhaps, we owe the endurance and hilarity of that infinite
source of sequels: the bride of Frankenstein. But let us consider the impossible func-
tion of the female product or being at closer range.

After the original urge of the first creature’s production, the possibility of a
second one appears quite clearly as a self-conscious labor.

During my first experiment, a kind of enthusiastic frenzy had blinded me to the horror of
my employment; my mind was intently fixed on the consummation [“sequel” in the 1818
edition] of my labour, and my eyes were shut to the horror of my proceedings. But now I
went to it in cold blood, and my heart often sickened at the work of my hands. (434)

Whereas the first monster came to being almost as the result of an unconscious
impetus (the deep, single chord struck by Professor Waldman’s enunciations), the
second is a tedious and minutely real bit of handiwork. The necessity under which Dr. Frankenstein stands, now responsible to the first daemon, eradicates the last vestiges of his independence. He begins to refer to himself as a slave (421) and to see himself within the frame of the monster’s own exile. He describes himself as “under a ban—as if I had no right to claim their sympathies—as if never more might I enjoy companionship with them [his family]” (417). The daemon’s lack of rights and community has been effectively transferred to his human creator and guarantor. The dread that fills him at the thought of leaving his promise unfulfilled drives him to action, while the destructive potential of its consequences steadily escalates in his thoughts.

His promise to the daemon both enslaves and feminizes the Doctor. The second production is less delirium than conscious handiwork, and in its undertaking the Doctor now feels himself to be under scrutiny. His focalization of himself falls increasingly under the compass of the daemon’s gaze. The progress of his travels has been shadowed and his double takes on a panoptical ubiquity until, finally, the threat of his creature’s presence is consummated by his actual appearance:

I trembled and my heart failed within me, when, on looking up, I saw by the light of the moon the daemon at the casement. A ghastly grin wrinkled his lips as he gazed on me, where I sat fulfilling the task which he had allotted to me. (436)

Unsuspecting, the Doctor has become the object of a scrutinizing gaze. But is he working on a bit of lace? He is seated at the task allotted to him, he is viewed from the window, working within. The male monster has isolated and domesticated the scientist who dreamt him up and built him out of parts. The lines of identity and sexuation begin to tangle radically for the shock of the discovery of this witness—and witness is no longer strong enough, but rather supervisor or overseer—directly follows the pivotal passage in which the Doctor reflects on the consequences of creating the monster’s female other.

The narrative of experimentation in the novel crescendos when the Doctor, breaking from his labors, falls into a waking reverie concerning the consequences of his work. In a passage that begins with the by-now inevitable conceit of enchaînement, Dr. Frankenstein recounts:

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 forever 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 neighborhood 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. (435)
In this passage, the solitude of the Doctor’s remorse burgeons into a universal threat as the stakes are raised by the attempt to imagine the female other meant to come. The late consideration of her potential for reason would be amusing enough if it weren’t followed by the possibility that she would refuse participation in a compact she did not authorize—indeed, which preceded her creation. The threat of her discretion begins to overdetermine the train of Frankenstein’s reflections as he vacillates between the possibility that the female monster will revile the male, flee his company, despise his kind, and disappoint his hopes. The alternate fear: that the two will join ranks and reproduce. The female monster will either reproduce the crisis one more time or reproduce it exponentially. This thought drives the scene to its crisis:

Even if they were to leave Europe and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race of evils [“devils” in the 1818 edition] would be propagated upon the earth who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror. Had I right, for my own benefit, to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations? I had before been moved by the sophisms of the being I had created; I had been struck senseless by fiendish threats; but now, for the first time, the wickedness of my promise burst upon me; I shuddered to think that future ages might curse me as their pest, whose selfishness had not hesitated to buy its own peace at the price, perhaps, of the existence of the whole human race.

I trembled and my heart failed within me, when, on looking up, I saw by the light of the moon the daemon at the casement. A ghastly grin wrinkled his lips as he gazed on me, where I sat fulfilling the task which he had allotted to me. (436)

Dr. Frankenstein now recoils at woman’s work with fatal consequences. He will no longer be the creator of life but a mere instrument of its reproduction. Yet, in this role, he will endow his daemon with the prospect of patriarchal potency, which, in his bewildered fancy, then culminates directly in interspecies war. In one split second, the Doctor’s self-understanding shifts from handmaiden to evil genius deplored by future generations. Frankenstein, now trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which he was working (436). His labor has been alienated and he lays waste to his reproductive power. The complex lines of gender and sexuation alluded to now involve the curious circumstance that in creating the female other, the Doctor is enslaved, feminized, and rendered both an object of scrutiny and a racial/species threat to his own. If the first monster reveals elisions within Enlightenment political fictions, the second throws the possibility of succession right off its tracks. If the problematic of reproduction signals the impossibility of the feminine subject in Shelley’s novel, the disembodied human being that must be eradicated before existing suggests the binds of rights-claims when put forward by members of structurally excluded groups.

The prospect of the coming-to-life of the sexed citizen brings with it a human crisis presented in the text in terms of a future race war. In this sense, Mary Shelley’s
narrative experiment also escapes the airless fiction of gender difference as distinct and separable from the existence of particular groups. What the monster never allows the Doctor or reader to forget is his need for others. If the staging of the scene of the monster’s appeal to his producer alludes to the speculative fictions of contractarian political philosophy, then what becomes the inevitable supplement of the fiction—an intrusion in the form of the daemon’s needs—pushes the novel’s plot to escalation and rupture. The point at which the monster’s story takes on a life of its own and reverses the Doctor’s own status could also be regarded as the juncture at which (from the point of view of the citizen from Geneva) the fiction of the citizen must be curbed. The manufactured being’s desire must be thwarted and its potential manifestation has to revert to a mere fiction (the uncreated daemon whose potential remains a narration and does not “literally” burst onto the scene).

*Homme or Citoyen?*

Dr. Frankenstein’s daemon looms as a body in the mirror that abstracts the rights of the citizen and elides the existence of social groups. He calls himself an Adam and asks for the afterthought of an Eve, except he asks it of his creator, who any other might call “his/our fellow man.” The monster calls upon man to grant him community of “his kind.” His plea scrambles the codes, however, because it requires not a formal consensus but a creative act. The act of declaration must result in a further creative act that would then establish his *species* after the fact. The notable twist on the model of the declaration of rights introduced by the daemon’s demand is that it is not based on a declaration of independence but rather on one of dependence: dependence on the private sphere or on the sustenance provided by the particular group. Here again we hear the strains of the transports of Rousseau’s *Réveries.*

A fiendish rage animated him as he said this; his face was wrinkled into contortions too horrible for human eyes to behold; but presently he calmed himself and proceeded, “I intended to reason. This passion is detrimental to me, for you do not reflect that you are the cause of its excess. If any being felt emotions of benevolence towards me, I should return them a hundred and hundredfold; for that one creature’s sake I would make peace with the whole kind! 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 my request!” (413)

The monster blames the excess of his passion on the Doctor, and in fact, the daemon’s genesis is something like an animated map of the Doctor’s own history of
psychic excess, or, better, the by-product of the mechanism of his psychic economy. Paradoxically, the monster will achieve his independence from this economy by securing his avowed dependence on a being of another sex—the initiation of another economy. He does arguably hold a common stake in reason with mankind, and the Doctor’s immediate response to the monster’s outburst registers this: “I felt there was some justice to his argument” (413). He shudders, however, to think of the “possible consequences of . . . consent” (413). The unnamed daemon makes a compelling promise, in the quoted passage, for reconciliation with the general—mankind—through commerce with the particular, one creature. This, however, would necessarily take place between him and another—a point that the facts of the monster’s embodiment can never allow to be forgotten.

It is precisely the social nonviability of the solitary monster, though figured as a male being, that renders him an indicator of the sexed subject. This nonviability, not surprisingly, is double. First of all, the specificity of his body, his need for and implication in a community, cannot appear under the rubric of his “reasoning being.” Further, the monster’s possible entrance into the jurisdiction of reason is fatally blocked by this realm’s inability to account for reproduction on any level but in terms of the formal parthenogenesis of the law itself—the spawn of reason’s self-consciousness and the unspoken presuppositions of the subject of politics. The existence and perpetuation of the social group (that is, the elided “facts” of both Kant’s imperative and Rousseau’s contract) haunt Geneva in the form of the monster’s irrepresible demand, and the daemon gives the lie to the philosophically necessary in the form of his need. His requisition sends up the stronghold of pure moral philosophy. He contaminates the formal exemplarity of the category of “reasoning beings” with an example that might proliferate materially—an innovation of form that would also reproduce—and the form of its reproduction would become its content. The problem of the monster’s relationship to the law is neither properly theoretical nor ethical in Kant’s terms; that is, it can be conclusively situated neither in the realm of nature nor in that of freedom. His case both reproduces and confuses the distinction. His is an alien instantiation of that divide. The daemon’s persistence as species would radically interrupt the givenness of nature because he is not given in nature, though he gives himself before an idea of the law through his own actions. As an instance before the law, the monster’s embodiment reveals the instability of both the theoretical and ethical realms of reason.

Victor Frankenstein can hear the justice of the monster’s claim (as an ideal citizen) but cannot grant him the corollary rights of man: the protection of the necessities of his life. In the “series of his being” as an unfinished citizen, the daemon comes to figure something akin to the “unreal universality” of the rights-bearer in Karl Marx’s analysis of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. Shelley’s Frankenstein thus renders a specifically modern dilemma of embodiment, and the monster walks the earth as a disassociated species being inopportune...
and adrift. In his figure he comprehends man and citizen at once, but he can no more unify these identities than does the Declaration.

The daemon’s attempt to succeed to the rights of man brings to mind the historical reiterations and amendments of these declared rights by political movements that have fought the historical exclusions of the “universal.” The narrative course run by the daemon breaks off, and I would argue that it is in virtue of its breaking off that his place within the narrative signals to classes and collectivities posed at the limit of politics. The daemon’s narrative existence pulls its reader, like the monster his maker, toward the irreducible fact of reason in difference and the hope for a composite equality, just as his dilemma drags the paradoxes of reason into political meaning.

Notes

For Kathryn and Warren Reese, in memoriam.

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1. The novel possesses a singular capacity to take on meaning and spark the imagination. Its unnamed monster comes forward with so shadowy an existence that he has been able to catalyze paradigmatic readings in numerous, often conflicting, methodologies. These include biographical, narratological, feminist, psychoanalytic, deconstructive, postcolonial, history-of-science, and technology-studies approaches to the reading of texts. The scholarship is too vast to synthesize in one footnote, though I will touch on a number of seminal works of criticism that reflect these methods of reading. For an extremely helpful introduction to the scholarship of the “Frankenstein industry,” see Berthold Schoene-Harwood, ed., Mary Shelley: Frankenstein (New York, 2000).

Troubled Legacy: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein


In contrast to the anonymously authored original edition, the revisions of 1831 elide the implication of incest between Victor Frankenstein and Elizabeth Lavenza as well as many of the tropes of Gothic fiction. Where ghoulish forms of embodiment and medieval figures enliven the 1818 edition, the later edition renders many of the novel’s figures as abstractions (Lavenza becomes Frankenstein’s “more than sister,” “she who no expression could body forth,” while a “race of devils” becomes a race of “evils”). These modes of phrasing more acutely recall the language of the philosophical politics of the Enlightenment and tend to expand the interpretive possibilities of the novel. Though arguments in favor of using the 1818 edition often bear witness to the social oppressions of Shelley’s later life, they also have the unfortunate effect of discrediting the author’s final editorial emendations.

5. Based on thorough examinations of the various manuscripts of Frankenstein and Mary Shelley’s journal, David Ketterer asserts that “[f]or her account of the monster’s growing awareness she studies Locke’s An Essay Concerning Human Understanding intensively between 18 November 1816 and 8 January 1817’’; David Ketterer, “(De)Composing Frankenstein: The Import of Altered Character Names in the Last Draft,” Studies in Bibliography: Papers of the Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia 49 (1996), 263. Cer-
tain sections of book 2, chapters 1 and 3, of An Essay Concerning Human Understanding suggest themselves as intertexts: particularly §6 in chapter 1 on the “state of a child.” Brooks, on the other hand, contends: “Like so much else in the story of the Monster’s education through sensation, experience, and the association of ideas, his discovery of language stands within Enlightenment debates about origins, coming in this instance close to the scenarios of Rousseau’s Essai sur l’origine des langues, which sees language originating not in need but in emotion”; Peter Brooks, “What Is a Monster?” in Frankenstein: Mary Shelley, ed. Fred Botting (London, 1995), 86. For an excellent discussion of the potential reference to the polemical representation of Godwin and his political philosophy as a “monster,” see again Sterrenburg, “Mary Shelley’s Monster: Politics and Psyche in Frankenstein,” 143–71. Shelley’s reading of Rousseau can be documented and demonstrated through reference both to her journals and to her encyclopedia article on Rousseau; O’Rourke, “Nothing More Unnatural: Mary Shelley’s Revision of Rousseau,” 543–69.

6. In this, the monster both does and does not resemble the “boy of about ten,” invoked by Etienne Bonnot de Condillac in his Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge, who “lived among bears” in the forests between Russia and Lithuania. “It took a long time before he could utter a few words, which he still did in a very barbarous manner. As soon as he could speak, he was asked about his former state. But he could not remember any more than we can recall what happened to us in the cradle.” Like that boy, the monster cannot develop his capacity for language until he finds a human example to imitate; unlike him, he is later able to narrate his previous existence; Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge, ed. Hans Aarsleff (Cambridge, 2001), 88. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on the role Safie plays in the humanizing of the monster’s development and the daemon’s attainment of literacy within the terms of imperialism; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, A Critique of Postcolonial Reason (Cambridge, 1999), 138.

7. Where “man” will not associate, a feminine gendered other will? Note how in this instance, the universal, abstract parlance of “one” is jarringly displaced by the feminine pronoun, announcing the immediacy, concretion, and specificity of the demand. The appearance of this gender-shift is beautifully sudden, as the masculine pronoun—so easily overheard in the parlance of a subject’s rights—had not yet led to an explicit demonstration of his, the daemon’s, genital viability.

8. I concur with Jean Starobinski’s insistence that Rousseau’s philosophy of “natural man” is not meant to have any particular historical referent; Jean Starobinski, Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La transparence et l’obstacle (Paris, 1971), 330–55. Claude Lévi-Strauss also makes this point in Tristes Tropiques (New York, 1977), 38. Rousseau carefully sets the empirical study of man and “les livres scientifiques” to one side in his preface, beginning his answer with the inspired phrase: “Commencons donc, par écarter tous les faits”; Rousseau, Œuvres complètes (Dijon, 1985), 3:123. Rousseau’s natural man is no less a concoction than is Shelley’s daemon (as Shelley herself notes in her encyclopedia entry). Nonetheless, one cannot therefore overlook the running presence of “facts”—proto-anthropological studies contemporary to Rousseau—in the footnotes of the first part and throughout the extended, optional endnotes of the second Discourse.


10. Starobinski offers a dialectical reading of Rousseau’s understanding of reason in the second Discourse; Starobinski, La transparence et l’obstacle, 346–47.

12. “And while empirical laws may give him valuable guidance, a purely empirical theory of right, like the wooden head in Pheadrus’ fable, may have a fine appearance, but will unfortunately contain no brain”; Immanuel Kant, “Foundations for the Metaphysics of Morals,” in Political Writings, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, 1991), 132.


16. See Louis Althusser for a discussion of the relation of global exploration, civil war in Europe, and the Reformation to the rise of the project of writing the “history of all men who have ever lived.” I shall cite here from Louis Althusser, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx, trans. Ben Brewster (London, 1982), 19:

These upheavals, whose echo can be heard in all the works of the period, gave the material of the scandalous tales brought back from across the seas the contagious dignity of facts real and full of meaning. What had previously been themes for compilation, extravaganzas to appease the passions of the erudite, became a kind of mirror for the contemporary unease and the fantastic echo of this world in crisis. This is the basis for the political exoticism (known history itself, Greece and Rome, becoming the other world in which the present world seeks its own image) which has dominated thought since the sixteenth century.

Such is Montesquieu’s object, too. As he says, “The objects of this work are the Laws, the various customs, and manners of all the nations on earth. It may be said, that the subject is of prodigious extent, as it comprehends all the institutions received among mankind” [A Defence of the Spirit of Laws, part 2: The General Idea]. It is precisely this object that distinguishes him from all the writers who, before him, had hoped to make a politics of science. For never before him had anyone had the daring to reflect on all the customs and laws of all the nations of the world.

17. Ibid., 20.

18. Compare Althusser on Montesquieu to Kant on practical reason. Althusser: “We might say that their science [Hobbes, Spinoza, Grotius] is as far from Montesquieu’s as the speculative physics of a Descartes is from the experimental physics of a Newton. The one directly attains in simple natures or essences the a priori truth of all possible physical facts, the other starts from the facts, observing their variations in order to disengage their laws”; ibid.


21. Note that Kant’s argument forestalls the possibility that all finite rational beings might possess identical feelings—the importance of the distinction is still categorical and not circumstantial. “But suppose that finite rational beings were unanimous in the kind of objects their feelings of pleasure and pain had, and even in the means of obtaining the former and preventing the latter. Even then they could not set up the principle of self-love as a practical law, for the unanimity itself would be merely contingent [zufällig]”; Kant, Critique of Practical Reason, 25; German: Kant, Werkeausgabe, 7:133–34. It would still not be a priori—grounded in the legislation of reason. The “empirically universal” remains “merely empirical.”
22. For a reading of the connection between monstrosity and Kant’s sublime see Barbara Claire Freeman, “Frankenstein with Kant: A Theory of Monstrosity or the Monstrosity of Theory,” in Frankenstein: Mary Shelley, 191–205.
25. “Now this principle of morality, on account of the universality of its legislation which makes it the formal supreme determining ground of the will regardless of any subjective differences among men, is declared by reason to be a law for all rational beings in so far as they are competent to determine their actions according to principles and thus to act according to practical a priori principles, which alone have the necessity which reason demands in a principle. It is thus not limited to human beings but extends to all finite beings having reason and will; indeed, it includes the Infinite Being as the supreme intelligence”; Kant, Critique of Practical Reason, 32. German: Kant, Werkausgabe, 7:142–43.
27. “It is therefore essential, if the general will is to be able to express itself, that there should be no partial society within the State, and that each citizen should think only his own thoughts”; ibid., 150.
28. “This ‘play’ on words is once again the index of a Discrepancy: a difference in theoretical status of the isolated individual and social groups—this difference being the object of denegation inscribed in the ordinary use of the concept of particular interest. This denegation is inscribed in so many words in his declaration of impotence: human groups must not exist in the State. A declaration of impotence, for if they must not exist, that is because they do exist. An absolute point of resistance which is not a fact of Reason but a simple, irreducible fact: the first encounter with a real problem after this long ‘chase’”; ibid.
29. Ibid., 152.
30. Rousseau, Oeuvres complètes, 1:995. I have quoted this passage in the original because the tone and emphasis of the original more clearly evokes the urgency of Shelley’s own composition than does the English of contemporary translations. “So now I am alone in the world, with no brother, neighbor or friend, nor any company left me but my own. The most sociable and loving of men has with one accord been cast out by all the rest. With all the ingenuity of hate they have sought out the cruellest torture for my sensitive soul, and have violently broken all the threads that bound me to them. I would have loved my fellow men in spite of themselves”; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Reveries of the Solitary Walker, trans. Peter France (New York, 1979), 27.
32. One need only turn to the 1996 U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in the Romer v. Evans case to behold the continuing significance of the problem of the “particular” group within the juridical struggle for equal protection of the law. Following are two brief segments of the decision written by Justice Kennedy from Romer, Governor of Colorado, et al. v. Evans et al. (94–1039), 517 U.S. 620 (1996):

Amendment 2 bars homosexuals from securing protection against the injuries that these public accommodations laws address. That in itself is a severe consequence, but there is more. Amendment 2, in addition, nullifies specific legal protections for this targeted class in all transactions in housing, sale of real estate, insurance, health and welfare services, private education, and employment . . .

We must conclude that Amendment 2 classifies homosexuals not to further a proper legislative end but to make them unequal to everyone else. This
Colorado cannot do. A State cannot so deem a class of persons a stranger to its laws. Amendment 2 violates the Equal Protection Clause, and the judgment of the Supreme Court of Colorado is affirmed.

Though the questions raised by my reading of the peculiar configuration of Shelley’s novel remain formal, their importance to the articulation of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, for instance, is far from irrelevant.

Commentators who read Frankenstein with Paradise Lost have variously aligned the daemon with Adam, Satan, and Eve. True to his composite nature, all of these readings are plausible and engaging. My intent here is not to force the being into any definite correlation. It is easy to see how he could be an Adam looking for an Eve, a Satan railing against the generative power of Dr. Frankenstein, an Eve in allusion to book 4 of Paradise Lost as Brooks argues (Brooks, “What Is a Monster?” 87), or a being whose relationship to the biologically and culturally reproductive ends of the family debar him from commerce with “others” and “his own kind.”

33. Althusser, Montesquieu, Marx, Rousseau, 152.
34. Ibid., 151.
35. “Or (so my fond fancy imagined) some accident might meanwhile occur to destroy him and put an end to my slavery forever” (421), and “For myself there was one reward I promised myself from my detested toils—one consolation for my unparalleled sufferings; it was the prospect of that day when, enfranchised from my miserable slavery, I might claim Elizabeth and forget the past in my union with her” (422).
36. “If I were alone, would he not at times force his abhorred presence on me to remind me of my task or to contemplate its progress?” (421).

The perfected political state is, by its nature, the species-life [Gattungsleben] of man as opposed to his material life. . . . Where the political state has attained to its full development, man leads, not only in thought, in consciousness, but in reality, in life, a double existence—celestial and terrestrial. He lives in the political community [politisches Gemeinwesen], where he regards himself as a communal being [Gemeinwesen], and in civil society [bürgersiche Gesellschaft] where he acts simply as a private individual [Privatmensch], treats other men as means, degrades himself to the role of a mere means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers. The political state, in relation to civil society, is just as spiritual as is heaven in relation to earth. . . .

. . . In the state, on the contrary; where he is regarded as a species-being, man is the imaginary member of an imaginary sovereignty, divested of his real, individual life, and infused with an unreal universality.


This part (which inevitably becomes a party: the party of the universal, or of the abolition of particularities and classes) presents itself, then, not just as the most active mouthpiece of the citizenry, but as that fraction which is capable
of presenting its own emancipation as the *criterion* of general emancipation (or as that fraction which, in continuing in slavery and alienation, inevitably entails the unfreedom of all). This, as we know, is what has been presented successively or simultaneously in the political discourse and practice of proletarians, women, colonized and enslaved peoples of colour, sexual minorities... And these examples go to show that, in reality, the whole history of emancipation is not so much the history of the demanding of unknown rights as of the real struggle to enjoy rights which *have already been declared*.