English

Final Essay

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The State of Nature and *Frankenstein*

Frankenstein is indeed a legendary literary work which deals quite intimately with the nature of humanity, and of creation. Given such contents, it is not surprising that the novel also is influenced by the state of nature debates which were a hallmark of the enlightenment-era philosophy and politics around the time of its writing. *Frankenstein* is often pointed to as a portrayal of Jean-Jaques Rousseau's take on the debate, but there would seem to be evidence within the story's text and general construction to suggest that the other chief thinkers on the matter also had their influences.

The Enlightenment saw a great deal of philosophical growth. It bolstered science and human rights, and marked a move away from tightly-controlled religious systems into a more secular worldview. As noted, one of the oft-revisited notions of this movement was the idea of the state of nature. It is a proposal of an almost primeval state of humanity, one "free" as some might put it, from the laws and expectations of society; a state of unmoderated human nature. The nature of this debate was focused largely on the political sphere, with the three principle philosophers behind it –John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and Rousseau– focusing their debates in a greater debate on how government should run. The debate, however, and the people behind it have greater influence than just politics. The idea of what humanity is at its core is an evergreen

concern, and one which makes for great literature. Mary Shelley, indeed, was familiar with their works, and is especially noted to have been interested in Rousseau, likely leading to the great deal of interest in the connections between the two. According to James O'Rourke, in assessing Shelley's take on the figure, she "read the *Confessions* a year before she began writing Frankenstein, and… her journal shows that she reread at least some of the book during the transcribing of the novel" (p.4). O'Rourke also spends a great deal of focus on an essay written by Shelley which expressed an interest not just in Rousseau's philosophy, but his life, and suggests that this also influenced the narrative, with Rousseau's abandonment of his children being a blueprint for Frankenstein's abandonment of the Creature.

As to Rousseau's philosophy, however, he proposes that the state of nature is a place of relative goodness and freedom, in that people in this state have no reason to impede on their freedoms or those of others. He suggests that:

> Men in a state of nature being confined merely to what is physical in love, and fortunate enough to be ignorant of those excellences, which whet the appetite while they increase the difficulty of gratifying it, must be subject to fewer and less violent fits of passion, and consequently fall into fewer and less violent disputes. (Rosseau, 174)

The evils that are found in society, he seems to decide, are not the subject of basic human nature, but of the new class of human nature which is demanded by civil society. People on their own are able to live life in attunement with nature, as the Creature does in his early days. There is no need to harm another being, no need to impede on their nature; it is a life of natural wonder, of living with and from the land. It is not until society emerges into the Creature's worldview that he begins to grow violent. He elaborates that "in the state of nature… everything is common… in the state of society all rights are fixed by law, and the case becomes different" (Rosseau, 55). The

Creature lived with the deLanceys, in secret, throughout the winter. He did not take their goods, rather he supplied himself with their shelter, for it was “common” to them, and supplied them with more goods in the form of wood. O’Rourke, who is interested in how Rousseau impacted Shelley’s writing, agrees that “this is the best argument for the original goodness of the monster, for in this case the two primal Rousseauian instincts collide, and the monster chooses to exercise compassion even as it conflicts with his own self-preservation” (O’Rourke, 8). It was a mutually beneficial arrangement, spurned by a natural love, and a curiosity for the family community within the hut. However, this goodness does not last for long. He remained innocent and docile until, cast away by the son when he sought companionship with the father, he began to understand the role he was forced into by society. Society, in the town, in the cabin, and later in the mind of his very own creator, cast the Creature into the role of “monster”. It is a societal label, for he does not fit their concepts of nature, he does not fully understand their laws or how to fit within them, and exists beyond the confines of their sympathy.

Certainly, then, Rousseau’s generally good worldview of humanity seems in line with the Creature’s early narrative, but at odds with the rest of the novel. In this dissonance there would seem to be a deal of Hobbes present. Hobbes is known for his harsh view of the state of nature, a view which is popularly summarized as: the state of nature is equal to chaos. He suggests that in a state of nature, it is a state of constant “warre of every man against every man… the notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice have there no place… they are Qualities, that relate to men in Society, not in Solitude" (Hobbes, 129). Upon reading such a statement it is quite easy to envision the pieces of the *Frankenstein* narrative piecing together within this framework. Perhaps most clearly is the fact that the Creature, and Frankenstein, when in nature -and together- are in this state of war, this battle against chaos and each other. The Creature starts out

seeing nature as a refuge, but it begins to turn into a battlefield, a course in which to torture Frankenstein for his negligence, and for his cruelty against him, his own creation.

Another angle for consideration, however, is that of Frankenstein, specifically, as a Hobbesian character with relation to the second half of the quote "the notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice… are Qualities, that relate to men in Society, not in Solitude" (Hobbes, 129). Frankenstein, in solitude, creates the monster, descends into paranoia, and destroys the Creature's bride. In society he is nurtured and nursed back to health, and sees –and is later reminded of– all the good that life has to offer, and all that he has done wrong. When first constructing the Creature, he notes that his "internal being was in a state of insurrection and turmoil" (Shelley, p.48), very much a Hobbesian warre. He is at war with the morals of the society that he lives in, a society which is absent in his isolation. It is, too, a society which is beyond his ideas and ideals. He is locked in the past, in superstition and mysticism; in the world of alchemy. He does not in this state fully conform to society's nations of "Right and Wrong", and thus proceeds down a path of twisted science, absent morality, and grave consequence. He devoted himself entirely to his pursuit, and regardless of any attempt to return him to society, he "could not tear [his] thoughts from [his] employment, loathsome in itself, but which had taken an irresistible hold of [his] imagination" (Shelley, p.55). He passes by the "most beautiful season" of summer –one described as more amazing than any on record before– and even his "father's feelings", and altogether his commitments to family, friends, and the world at large (Shelley, p.55).

It is possible that Frankenstein had for so long abstained from the rules of society that he had become incompatible with them, at least when his instincts took over. He was prone to fits of paranoia –perhaps understandable given the circumstances, but nevertheless dire– and would

frequently return to a state of flight away from ideas of togetherness and responsibility. Later in the novel he parted ways with Clerval to return to his work in secret, in private. It was a decision which led to a returned fear, and, when the Creature visited him, guilt. With company in the presence of his work, he began to fear once again what damage that work could bring to society. However, while this decision brought devastation to his life, and those around him, it was a sign of society returning to him. Diana Reese, in examining the *Troubled Legacy: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and Human Rights*, suggests that "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*" (Reese, 6). Frankenstein, returned from utter solitude by the Creature's appearance, is returned from a state of irresponsibility to one of warre. It becomes, from this point, a race of creator and created to the ends of the Earth, and both being's demise in one of the harshest states of nature to be found: the Arctic Circle.

The nature of this clash is perhaps a signpost of an entrance to Locke's take on the state of nature. In his *Second Treatise of Government*, Locke suggests that in the state of nature:

> Nothing [is] more evident, than that creatures of the same species and rank, promiscuously born to all the same advantages of nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another without subordination or subjection, unless the lord and master of them all should, by any manifest declaration of his will, set one above another, and confer on him, by an evident and clear appointment, an undoubted right to dominion and sovereignty" (Locke, 8).

Perhaps, then, the Creature and Frankenstein are locked in a battle to determine, as Locke proposes, which has a "clear appointment" to "dominion" over the other. They are not, by nature,

born to the same “advantages”, for Frankenstein made the Creature, and the Creature is, at least physically, vastly superior to the mere human. However, given that Frankenstein did indeed create the creature, this could be seen here to grant him a rank above the Creature. Rousseau also deals with the matter of sovereignty, but in a more docile way; his view is that a ruler, or assembly of rulers, must be present to confer order over the civil society. Locke, here, suggests that superiority is the key to sovereignty, and thus the dynamic witnessed seems to be much more within the realm of his philosophy.

With all of these philosophies at play, though, it is interesting to note that Frankenstein is framed as a character rooted so deeply in the mysticism of the past that he is entirely adverse to any understanding of Enlightenment era thinking. Upon reaching University, Professor Krempe scoffed at Frankenstein for his “ancient” studies, and gave him “a list of several books treating of natural philosophy which he desired [him] to procure” (Shelley, p.46). However, Frankenstein cast aside this suggestion as an attack on his ideas, scraping together all the unrelated observations about Krempe and the sciences that he could to support this supposition. Frankenstein also reflects that his father likewise discredited the “ancient” scholars, but was likewise unsuccessful. Had either attempt been successful, it is “possible that the train of [his] ideas would never have received the fatal impulse that led to [his] ruin” (Shelley, p.39). In a novel which is so deeply rooted in right and wrong, and the state of nature, it is very interesting to consider that the supposed intellectual is entirely opposed to any understanding of the nature of the events he finds himself in. His self-enforced ignorance of these factors almost allows him a certain degree of distance from the proceedings, for he is able to deflect his guilt upon the creature of his guilt. He is able to blame the Creature for the consequences of his own actions, for he ignores the reality of the Creature’s plight, a struggle he originated. Had he given more

consideration to his responsibilities as a member of society, of civilization, instead of to archaic pseudosciences, he could have avoided a great deal of tragedy.

Ultimately Shelley, drawing upon a font of Enlightenment ideals, is able to subvert them to create a tragic story of the state of nature unleashed in a world of civility. It is a chilling tale of how thin a line there is between notions of unchecked human nature and chaos, but also invites the reader to ponder just what that line is. When the Creature originally comes upon the de Laceys, he is "happy to have found a shelter, however miserable, from the inclemency of the season, and still more from the barbarity of man" (Shelley, p.106). The Creature is not explicitly evil in the state of nature, it is civilization which spurns him down the path of destruction he finds himself on. He is shunned and chased, abandoned by his own creator and all whom he tries to seek empathy from, and is ultimately robbed of all hopes for a happy life. Shelley also stages the scene of the Creature's framing of poor Justine, recalling that "thanks to the lessons of Felix and the sanguinary laws of man, [he] had learned now to work mischief" (Shelley, p.144). Are it not these laws, these "notions" and "qualities" of society, these "excellences" which both drive and allow for some of the worst acts of the novel? Here Rousseau returns, for he writes: "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains" (Rousseau, 35). The world can be a cruel place which binds the Creature, Frankenstein, and all its other denizens to certain parameters for their entire lives. Even in the most basic state of nature, humanity still is bound to certain courses, but the laws of civility, the expectations of society, ensure that all are, as a baseline, expected to live life a certain way, come what may. Frankenstein ignores reason to strive for academic excellence –the Creature is meant to be his grand accomplishment in the world of science, to impress his professor and ensure his legacy– and the court so wrongfully and brutally sentences Justine to a cruel end for nothing but the "mischief" of circumstance. Indeed, "sanguinary laws" are, by

definition, laws that are “bloodthirsty” and “attended by bloodshed” (Merriam-Webster). The “barbarity of man”, redressed as civility and sent back out into the world.

It does not matter, really, what philosophy *Frankenstein* subscribes to, it does not have to be singular; it is its own entry into the debate of the state of nature, one which, in the context of a rapidly changing world, asks if the edicts and inventions of a civilized humanity are truly any more just or gentle than the impulses of humanity unchecked.

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