

# “How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe...?”

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## Frankenstein, Walton and the Monster SIBYLLE ERLE

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*Abstract:* This essay reiterates the importance of Captain Robert Walton in Shelley's novel. Walton is the addressee of Frankenstein's story and drawing attention to his presence helps with unravelling the complexity of the creation scene. The focus is on physiognomical creation, i.e. not only on Frankenstein's body-making but also his aesthetic response to both the immobile and animated body. Though the Creature's physical ugliness may be a matter of degree, Frankenstein contradicts himself in his description of its effects. He also appears to have expected that animation would not substantially have interfered with the anticipated reality of the animated Creature. But it does. Shelley, it has been argued, revised Adam Smith's ideas about sympathy, suggesting that—if a person inspires terror compensatory sympathy can be achieved through narrative. Is Walton able to handle the monster because he knows it? The essay discusses the dynamic between the visual and the auditory in Frankenstein to argue that Shelley responds to Johann Caspar Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* (1789-98).

This essay examines the theme of identity in *Frankenstein* (1818) by contextualising the Creature's looks and speech with Mary Shelley's response to the face-reading practices of the Swiss theologian, writer and physiognomist Johann Caspar Lavater (1757–1801). Lavater had been writing on physiognomy, the ancient art of face reading, since the early 1770s. Stressing the importance of appearance, he claimed that physiognomy's potential for character assessment could be harnessed and developed into the science of character, making the judgement of one person of any other an

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objective and, therefore, safe and reliable affair. Lavater was an avid collector of prints and portraits and eventually published his findings as the heavily-illustrated four-volume *Physiognomische Fragmente* (1775–78). The physiognomy project, which was controversial from the start, had a complicated publication history; it was abridged, revised as well as expanded and translated, appearing as two authorised and several pirated translations in England in the 1790s (Johnson 52–74). This essay reads *Frankenstein* as a response to Lavater’s discussion and representation of body-soul relationships; the idea that it is possible to pin them down and arrive at conclusive readings of character was at the heart of Lavater’s physiognomy. Shelley responds to Lavater’s approach by engaging with the question of identity and the claim that the soul imprints itself into the body (Caflich-Schnetzler 99). Throughout her novel, the Creature’s identity is imposed, interpreted and regulated by the responses of others. Appearance is of importance to the Creature’s sense of self and yet, this sense of self is not completely reliant on the encounters he has. He is judged repeatedly on his appearance alone but Shelley (contrary to Lavater) gives the Creature his own voice, allowing him to ponder his situation in life:

And what was I? Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant; but I knew that I [...] hideously deformed and loathsome; I was not even of the same nature as man. I was more agile than they, and could subsist upon coarser diet; I bore the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to my frame; my stature far exceeded theirs. When I looked around, I saw and heard of none like me. Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned? (96)

In this passage, the Creature is reflecting on the lived experience of failed social interactions. His appearance has prevented any kind of social exchange. Aware of his extraordinary physical abilities, the Creature continues to compare himself with those he cannot meet at close range. Initially, he does not identify himself as a new species; this happens later, when he asks Frankenstein for a mate. He thinks of himself as human-like and “other” because he does not find acceptance and there is no answer to his searching question, only “groans” (97).

The theme of identity recurs in the De Lacey scene with De Lacey asking, “who are you?” (Shelley 110). The blind man formulates this question after listening to the Creature’s pleas for protection: “You and your family are the friends whom I seek. Do not you desert me in the hour of trial” (110). When the Creature accepts the invitation to enter the cottage, he knows that he has very little time to win De Lacey over. He thinks that he could succeed because the De Laceys, too, were wronged outsiders. Talking about the family with admiration, the Creature reveals his fear of approaching and befriending them:

They are kind—they are the most excellent creatures in the world; but unfortunately, they are prejudiced against me. I have good dispositions; my life has been hitherto harmless, and, in some degree, beneficial; but a fatal prejudice clouds their eyes, and where they ought to see a feeling and kind friend, they behold only a detestable monster. (109)

Listening to the explanation, De Lacey cannot imagine the speaker to be other than human and yet, he is unsure about his character. He has no way of telling whom he is dealing with without the visual image. De Lacey relies on speech. In the novel, moreover, it does not say that De Lacey ever touches the Creature: “I am blind, and cannot judge your countenance, but there is something in your words which persuades me that you are sincere. I am poor, and an exile; but it will afford me true pleasure to be in any way serviceable to a human creature” (109). The scene ends abruptly and with the return of De Lacey’s children. There is no stopping them; the Creature, who is driven away, is furious.

The Creature’s self-identification as formless or monstrous is built from the so-called mirror scene and the moment the Creature grasps the reason for his isolation; when looking into a pool, he realises that he looks different:

I had admired the perfect forms of my cottagers—their grace, beauty, and delicate complexions: but how was I terrified, when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror: and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster

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that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification. Alas! I did not yet entirely know the fatal effects of this miserable deformity. (Shelley 90)

Struggling to recognise himself, the Creature is distraught because, despite the evidence he feels that he resembles the cottagers, having aspired to become like them in conduct and language. While living in the hovel behind the cottage, he listens and learns. The expression “in reality” (90) implies that he is beginning to understand the impact of his appearance.

The mirror scene raises interesting questions about the representability of the face (Dutroix 850), but it is doubtful whether the Creature refers to his face only when he considers his physical identity, e.g. if he separates his face from his body. The final sentence of the recognition scene (quoted above) adds poignancy to the Creature’s reflections but it also projects his inner strength. The Creature acknowledges his physical identity and, as Paul Youngquist notes, would never forget the “material fact of his physical deformity” (53). Only after De Lacey is rescued by his panic-stricken children (Shelley 110) does he accept that opinions of others do matter. The intervention in the De Lacey scene, in other words, affirms the reality of the deformed body. Regarding Lavater’s physiognomical practice, the Creature, though rejected by his maker, resists; when looking into the pool, he sees what others see, but he also disagrees and proposes an alternative interpretation. As a result of his botched creation, moral goodness and physical deformity have been fused into one, clashing image of himself. It is precisely this fusion which he wants to challenge as soon as he realises that it has caused his exclusion.

On the continent, Lavater had been criticised and ridiculed ever since the publication of *Von der Physiognomik* (1772) and Shelley would have known this. She was travelling and staying in Switzerland where Lavater had died in 1801. When the physiognomy project was translated into English, no changes were made; emphasis was put on physiognomy’s potential to develop into a science (Shookman 5). As well as admitting that he was still at the information-gathering stage, Lavater declared: “I neither will, nor can write a complete Treatise on the Science of Physiognomies. My ambition is limited to a few simple Essays; and the Fragments which I give, never can compose a Whole” (1). Lavater’s ideas about “science,” a word used somewhat loosely in *Essays on Physiognomy*, resonate with the approach to science in *Frankenstein*,

because Frankenstein is utterly convinced of the significance and value of his project so that he ignores all criticism and proceeds to work on it on his own (Shelley 35). Like Lavater, Frankenstein would not cease until he achieved his goal. Yet his determination is a calculated decision on Shelley's part, as her contemporaries would not have approved of Frankenstein's ambition. What she proposes through this fictional character's ambition is a radical idea.

The belief in the literal truth of the creation story was prevalent at the time. All of humanity was formed in God's image. In *Frankenstein*, it is through science that new life is created, which suggests that the scene in the laboratory is Shelley's 'modern' interpretation of divine creation. It has often been pointed out that the conversations about science in June 1816 inspired the first incarnation of *Frankenstein*, e.g. the ghost story written on 16 June 1816. Percy Bysshe Shelley was Mary Shelley's source and teacher. He was involved in the writing, composed the first, anonymous preface, and his review, which calls the Creature an "abomination and anomaly," suggests that it is the lack of social relations that caused his moral badness (Hatch 33).

Shelley's novel renders the relationship between creator and creation as close and interdependent. This allows for a combination of science (Frankenstein) with self-knowledge (Creature) and leads directly to Lavater and the objective of *Essays on Physiognomy* which, according to the work's title-page, is to "promote the knowledge and love of mankind." Lavater was a pastor and committed to physiognomy because he believed that the more that could be known about a person, the easier it was to love this person (1). He never acknowledged the consequences his theory could have and continuously appealed to his readers to understand that his physiognomy was work in progress. It was only natural that he was making the occasional mistake (1). In *Frankenstein*, though nobody should know the Creature better than Frankenstein, only Walton, a fleeting acquaintance, is able to see him for what he is. For Walton, who is writing to his sister, the Creature is a tragic figure: "Great God! What a scene has just taken place! I am yet dizzy with the remembrance of it. I hardly know whether I shall have the power to detail it; yet the tale which I have recorded would be incomplete without this final and wonderful catastrophe" (Shelley 186). Is this also Shelley's position?

Shelley's relation to Lavater's face-reading practice provides a historical as well as intellectual context for Frankenstein's relation to the Creature. Shelley does not reveal how the body is animated. Frankenstein mentions that he "collected the

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instruments of life around” him so that he could “infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing” (Shelley 38).<sup>1</sup> In the so-called laboratory scene, creation is presented as a supernatural event. When Frankenstein embarks on the second experiment, the creation of a female body in the Orkneys, the scene is less Gothic; Frankenstein appears to be in control. He is confident that he will succeed and improve on the first experiment. This time, however, he hesitates and decides not to complete the experiment for moral reasons: “Had I a right, for my own benefit, to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations?” (138). Shelley, of course, returns and rises to the provocations of her novel and especially the “spark” of life in her introduction to the 1831 edition. Yet the Gothic qualities of the creation scene (i.e. the absence of any explanation in the 1818 edition) prompts the question, I think, whether it had occurred to Shelley that the Creature could not have a soul, the most radical idea posed by her text.<sup>2</sup> After all, she equipped the Creature with a sense of self and he never doubts that he has a soul. What makes him human is his capacity for love and compassion.

Far too much attention has been paid to the scene set in the laboratory and it seems that interpretations of the novel have been overshadowed by its cinematic reception. This essay concentrates on the encounters of Frankenstein and Captain Robert Walton with the Creature, reading methods of character assessment against methods of observations recommended in Lavater’s *Essays on Physiognomy*. The proposed interpretation negotiates Shelley’s treatment of body-soul relationships in the designation process of character and the Creature’s attempts at finding out where he belongs, i.e. two important aspects of the identity theme. In the novel, the Creature’s moral deformity increases on account of the murders he commits, while his physical deformity stays the same. The growing divide is at odds with one of Lavater’s core beliefs, that the surface embodies a hidden depth. The Creature, moreover, keeps returning to this contradiction when he tells his life-story to explain about his

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1 Samuel Holmes Vasbinder interprets the absence of scientific explanation as a stylistic decision: “The processes producing the invention or technological advancement are carefully shrouded in mystery. In concealing the secret of the spark of life. Mary anticipates the method of the speculative fiction story in general” (26).

2 Martin Willis wonders at the soul’s physicality in Shelley’s “Transformation” (1831), a Faustian short story about the bargaining and recovery of a protagonist’s soul. Willis reminds us that Shelley, possibly because of her husband, would have been “most enamoured by romantic philosophy” (Willis 25) and interprets the creature as a symbol of “scientific materialism” (27), while claiming that the reason for the monster’s animation is that “electricity also gave a soul” (32).

appearance. He actively counteracts the assumptions made about the connection between his body and soul. The overall uncertainty about the connection between face and inner self plays an important part in the novel's engagement with the need for compassion. There is a continuous parallel between the novel's struggle with trusting the face and Lavater's many uncertainties about the face as a representation of character, so much so that we may read *Frankenstein* as a re-enactment of the problems of representation in Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy*.

Much has been made of Frankenstein as an unreliable narrator. His relationship with the Creature has been discussed many times over both through the lens of psychoanalytical theories and in terms of a doubling effect. The narrative structure, the narrative frames, the repetition of parts of the story and deteriorating states of mind or dream visions are familiar Gothic devices. They have also been interpreted as threats to the symbolic order and political authority (Mellor; Paulson). Walton is important, because he is the addressee of Frankenstein's story. Drawing attention to his presence helps at unravelling the complexity of the creation scene. This scene is really only a story told by Frankenstein to Walton. The meeting between Walton and the Creature, by comparison, takes place in real-narrative time and, Walton's reaction to the Creature, like that of Frankenstein, is by no means straightforward. He is familiar with the life stories of Frankenstein and the Creature. Should he feel and show compassion for both? Walton, because he has learnt much about the Creature from the story, is a well-prepared observer, who decides, when meeting the Creature on board his ship, to listen (against Frankenstein's advice) but also not to look when listening. Why does he keep his eyes averted? Is it that only by not looking that compassion can be achieved? The relationship between the visual and the auditory in *Frankenstein* is far more complex than has so far been acknowledged.

In *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy* (1988), David Marshall argues that sympathy in *Frankenstein* fails because of "fellow feeling" being converted into "aesthetic pleasure" rather than compassion (179).<sup>3</sup> Marshall draws on the eighteenth-century philosopher, Adam Smith, who, in exploring the motivation of selfish or benevolent human behaviour, develops the concept of the sympathetic spectator, explaining in his highly influential *Theory of Moral Sentiment* (1759) about the process of sympathy: "The compassion of the spectator must arise altogether from the consideration of what he himself would feel if he was reduced to the same unhappy situation,

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3 See also: Britton 6; Hatch 34.

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and, what perhaps is impossible, was at the same time able to regard it with his present reason and judgment” (Smith 7). Implied is that there need to be two subjects, the observer and the observed, and that the observer can never feel what the other feels but only what they would feel in the other’s situation. The desired outcome of the imagined changing-of-places is the assessment of moral conduct (Marshall 222). Analysing Smith’s conflation of the discourses of disability and aesthetics, Paul Kelleher delineates that for the model and its alignment of sympathy and judgement to work, Smith cannot but insist that spectators can control emotional responses so as not to completely identify with the observed. This would be counter-productive (Kelleher 45). James Chandler, who examines the problem of sympathy in the context of the sentimental tradition, writes that *Frankenstein* is a “staging of mixed feelings”; it is never made clear whether the Creature becomes or is a monster to start with (249). As Chandler stresses, all characters in the novel are driven by the search for companionship. The Creature himself “makes repeated efforts to forge a human connection” (247). However, we cannot talk of any kind of *proper* interaction or social situations in *Frankenstein*, because those who look at the Creature either run away or attack. They have no self-control which means that they have no time to understand, let alone conceive the Creature’s situation. In the De Lacey scene, the Creature comments that Felix intervenes at once and with “supernatural force” (Shelley 110). This would suggest that the failure of sympathy in *Frankenstein* is a failure to check or manage the emotions triggered by the Creature’s human-like yet extremely disfigured appearance. According to Smith, a social context is necessary for sympathy to be felt and acted out. In *Frankenstein*, the Creature’s search for companionship remains dependent on the outcome of first impressions, just as in Lavater’s approach to physiognomy. In *Essays on Physiognomy*, Lavater’s character readings tend to be based on the impression captured by a single portrait.

Adam Smith’s model relies on interpersonal relations as well as social situations. Without any reference point, a malformed person, Smith speculates, would never recognise their deviation from the norm (107). Only through the reactions of others can they learn about themselves: “Our first ideas of personal beauty and deformity, are drawn from the shape and appearance of others, not from our own. We soon become sensible, however, that others exercise the same criticism upon us. We are pleased when they approve our figure, and are disobliged when they seem to be disgusted” (100). Social interaction is important because, without it,



humans would never develop into moral beings. To put this differently, what connects Smith's thinking to Lavater's is that Smith's aesthetic theory is also a moral theory. Late eighteenth-century physiognomy, i.e. the version championed by Lavater, provides a fitting context for a discussion of the pursuit of sympathy in the midst of a society which is unable to identify with the monstrous other. Lavater proposes a process of sympathy which is sustained by self-knowledge. The better we read ourselves, the better we can understand others. While Smith talks about projection or virtual identification, Lavater explores close human relationships and focuses on physical likeness, which he says is the reason for friendship (Erle 95–114).<sup>4</sup> In *Frankenstein*, all attempts at friendship fail. Since nobody is exactly like the Creature—he literally doesn't fit in—nobody can ever feel for him.

Shelley uses physical description to build the characters of Frankenstein's teachers but also to explain Frankenstein's attitude towards the old and new sciences:

This professor [Waldman] was very unlike his colleague. He appeared about fifty years of age, but with an aspect expressive of the greatest benevolence; [...] His person was short, but remarkably erect; and his voice the sweetest I had ever heard [... and] I attended the lectures, and cultivated the acquaintance, of the men of science of the university; and I found even in M. Krempe a great deal of sound sense and real information, combined, it is true, with a repulsive physiognomy and manners, but not on that account the less valuable. In M. Waldman I found a true friend. (30, 32)

Frankenstein's opinion is based on first impression. He never revises it: Krempe is repulsive. He avoids him and loses interest in his teachings. Shelley, consequently, suggests Frankenstein's preference of Waldman in terms of physical attraction as well as like-mindedness, which he establishes himself by deducting it from physical appearance.

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4 Marshall already gestures towards this model when he argues that *Frankenstein* problematises shared likeness: "each character wishes for a fellow being, someone who is *like* himself. What they seek is not a friend or a companion but rather a *semblance*. It is not a coincidence that the moment in which Frankenstein admits being moved and displays compassion in listening to the monster is during his plea for a being like himself. Ironically, it is Frankenstein's creation of a being like himself that seems to cut him off from sympathy" (197).

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Shelley’s connection to Lavater, I think, is biographical as well as personal and this ubiquity is one of the reasons she set *Frankenstein* in the 1790s. Shelley’s mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, who was friendly with the Swiss-born painter, Henry Fuseli, a childhood friend of Lavater’s (Allentuck 89–112), was commissioned to translate the abridged German edition of *Essays on Physiognomy*.<sup>5</sup> The second connection exists through Shelley’s father, William Godwin, who was a friend of Thomas Holcroft’s (a translator of Lavater’s physiognomy) and not only called in a physiognomist to have his daughter’s face read in 1797 but also used physiognomy for characterization in *Caleb Williams*, published in 1794 (Juengel 367–68). William Nicholson, the physiognomist examining little Mary’s face a few days after her birth, later he wrote to Godwin explaining what he had done and warned that the identified character traits should be treated as preliminary observations, not because Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin’s face was so tiny and therefore difficult to read but because the reading had been done in a hurry. Putting Godwin’s expectations aside, it is worth noting that Nicholson’s report bears the same stylistic characteristics as Lavater’s physiognomical readings. Like Lavater, Nicholson prevaricates. His letter commences with the following caveat:

My view was, in fact, slight and momentary. I had no time to consider, compare, and combine. Yet I am disposed to think the following imperfect observation may lead you to more than a suspicion that our organization at the birth may greatly influence those motives which govern the series of our future acts of intelligence, and that we may even possess moral habits, acquired during the foetal state. (Kegan)

Rather than communicate his findings, Nicholson explains what is involved in a physiognomical reading: “time to consider, compare and combine.” Next, he pleads with Godwin to accept the scientific basis of his reading. Then he proceeds to list what he has found, emphasising that he is drawing on many years of experience:

1. The outline of the head viewed from above, its profile, the outline of the forehead, seen from behind and in its horizontal positions, are

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5 Juengel, who hints at Wollstonecraft’s response to physiognomy in *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), draws attention to relevant passages in the 1831 introduction and discusses Shelley’s concerns about an engraved portrait of her husband (354, 358, 367).

such as I have invariably and exclusively seen in subjects who possessed considerable memory and intelligence.

[...]

4. The form of the nose, the nostrils, its insertion between the eyes, and its changes by muscular action, together with the side of the face in which the characteristic marks of affection are most prominent, were scarcely examined. Here also is much room for meditation and remark. (Kegan)

Nicholson's reading exemplifies what is typical of a physiognomical reading; he prevaricates about what has been perceived in the face: "Here also is much room for meditation and remark." The first example links its analysis to other, similar interpretations of older faces and the second, though similarly inconclusive, appeals to a superordinate visual code, which Nicholson had no time to examine. Lavater, moreover, delayed or suspended physiognomical judgement whenever he juxtaposed images to make a point about a certain character trait and its rendering in different portraits, all the while educating his readers about details and nuances (Erle 134–63). Nicholson's struggle to both identify and interpret what he has seen can be traced to the face-to-face meetings in *Frankenstein*. Neither Frankenstein's reports nor Walton's letters give straightforward factual narratives about either the Creature's looks or character.

In *Essays on Physiognomy*, Lavater uses the word "character" to mean true, inner self, which is essential and unchanging. To capture "character," Lavater says, the physiognomist needs to differentiate between the fixed and the flexible features of a face:

The character, in a state of rest, resides in the form of the solid parts, and the inaction of those which are moveable. The character impassioned is to be traced in the motion of the moveable parts. The motion is in proportion to the moving power. Passion has a determinate relation to the elasticity of the man, or that disposition which renders him susceptible of passions.

Physiognomy points out the fund of the human faculties, and Pathognomy the interest of revenue which it produces. (1: 23)

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Lavater announces that he intends to analyse fixed and flexible features in equal parts, but he comes to focus on the shapes created by the bone structure (physiognomy), claiming that “character” gets contaminated by momentary expression or muscular movement (pathognomy). He needs physiognomical readings to be reliable and decides to work with portraits. “Character,” for Lavater, is linked to the notion of a divine image or likeness, which he associates with the human soul. This original becomes fully visible after death and through resurrection (Pestalozzi 286–87). To get to this image, Lavater says, the physiognomist has to carefully monitor his feelings during physiognomical observation. Since the image is mediated by the body, the physiognomist has to work hard to see it. The soul or “character,” according to Lavater, strives to impress itself from the inside (Caffisch-Schnetzler 99).

Lavater’s approach to physiognomy also documents the inner life of the observer, because the observer plays a role in the process of observation. Lavater, when examining a portrait, keeps a record of his feelings: “Every one experiences different sensations conformably to the difference of the Physiognomies which excite them. Every figure leaves impressions, which one dissimilar would not have produced” (I: 93). Lavater’s practice of physiognomy links a subject (a person) to an object or interpretation (a portrait), while creating an equivalence between what ought to be perceived as separate. By default, this reading process and approach to the face draws attention to the turbulent relationship between difference and similarity, between projection and expression. This phenomenon applies to *Frankenstein*. When they meet in the Alps, Frankenstein is familiar with the Creature’s physiognomy and pathognomy. When speaking to Walton, his narrative is mediated by memory from the earlier meetings as well as by address. His narrative also includes the Creature’s story. Frankenstein must successfully navigate between description and recognition of the facts. His intention is to convince Walton that his version of events is the master narrative. Shelley’s technique, a careful layering of points of view, is an effective tool with which to critique Lavater’s physiognomical theory. She does not solely, as Scott J. Juengel suggests, attack “Lavater’s reification of the body” (373) but rather targets his approach for blurring the boundaries between an object and its representation.<sup>6</sup>

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6 George C. Grinnell, writing on P. B. Shelley’s “On the Medusa,” considers Lavater in the context of British portraiture. He mentions *Frankenstein* in passing and implies that Shelley, like many others, would have found inspiration in Lavater’s physiognomical system “by which visual description blurred into measurements of character” (338).

Reading *Frankenstein* as a response to the representation of body-soul relationships in Lavater's physiognomy, Frankenstein's description of the immobile and animated bodies in the narrative of the laboratory scene appears in a new light. While staring at the body in front of him, Frankenstein records and reports on its animation. Firstly, it opens its eye, then it draws its first breath and finally the whole body stirs: "I saw the dull eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs" (Shelley 38–39). His gaze follows the course of the movement. The animation starts with the eyes and from the lungs before it reaches the limbs. Because of the narrative situation, Frankenstein digresses to share his reflections. He is talking to Walton and he has since tried to make sense of his initial response. Frankenstein could not and still cannot believe his eyes. He carefully selected all parts and, for Frankenstein, beauty and its aesthetic experience are associated with a dead body. This response, however, is at odds with what Philippe Ariès, in *The Hour of our Death* (1981), has described as the typically Western attitude towards corpses. A corpse is normally experienced as a "most loathsome and abhorred spectacle" (342). Frankenstein's emotional response includes disgust, but due to the narrative situation, the account is also infused with the wisdom of hindsight. What disturbs Frankenstein is how movement disrupts the stillness of the Creature's immobile body and what disturbs him even more is the Creature's attempt to speak to him after following him into his bedroom.

It appears that all aspects associated with movement clash with the image created by the still body. The Creature's physiognomy and pathognomy do not work in tandem. The assessment of the Creature is carried out in response to two different body-images: one immobile and one animated. While the former is denoted by *it*, the latter is attributed a *he*. Animation, in other words, projects the transition from "thing" to "catastrophe." (More about this transition in a moment.) The narration of the event is mediated as Frankenstein has told Walton that he carried on, even though he resented what he was doing: "often did my human nature turn with loathing from my occupation" (37). The description of the transformation of the immobile body is part of a carefully-constructed narrative. It includes remembered responses as well as reflections which postdate the event and Frankenstein does not simply relive the moment because he does not fully identify with his former self:

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How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful!—Great God! His skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour of the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips. (Shelley 39)

Frankenstein's report mixes emotional response with rational explanation. Taking in the features of the animated body, he struggles to comprehend and make sense of what he sees: “How can I describe my emotions at the catastrophe”? (39). Even though the experiment was a success, Frankenstein immediately labels it a “catastrophe.” This is odd as it had always been his intention to create new life and being alive means movement. In addition, remembering the immobile body, Frankenstein still (when talking to Walton) does not acknowledge that the body he created is an assemblage of parts. Instead, he perceives it as a homogenous whole. What he describes is skin which “scarcely covered the work of the muscles and arteries beneath” (Shelley 39). The skin, he says he saw, is not flabby and the image seems to remind him of a trained, muscular body. The turning point in the description is signalled through the word “but”: “but these luxuriances” (39). Another “but,” indicating yet another change in narrative direction, is in the next passage, where Frankenstein explains why he cannot bear to look: “but now that I had finished the dream of beauty vanished and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to bear the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room” (39). What confuses Frankenstein is the very fact of movement and his response is two-fold: firstly, he responds to the immobile and then to the animated body.

What is Frankenstein trying to communicate to Walton? The phenomenon of movement has already been discussed in terms of a collapse of surface and depth (Juengel 357). Juengel's interpretation relates to physiognomy but not to Lavater's practice and consequently does not probe deeply enough into the quality of Frankenstein's narrative, which differentiates between the Creature's physiognomy

(bone or fixed features) and its pathognomy (muscle or mobile features). What tends to be discussed is the Creature's perceived ugliness. Denise Gigante, for example, focuses on ugliness, which, she contends, triggers Frankenstein's response. This response is basically the same to both the body dead and alive and it only differs in intensity. The Creature's ugliness "did not bother Victor (or anyone else for that matter) before he came to life." In support, Gigante relates back to Frankenstein's explanation to Walton: "he was ugly then; but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have received" (40). Gigante, too, overlooks the significance of the word "but" and the narrative shifts it introduces. Therefore, the transition from beautiful "thing" to "catastrophe" in Frankenstein's mind is not fully explored.

Though the Creature's ugliness may be a matter of degree, Frankenstein contradicts himself in his description of its effects. He also appears to have expected that movement would not substantially interfere with the eagerly anticipated reality of the animated body. But it does. As long as the Creature is immobile, Frankenstein considers its body to be "unfinished" (Shelley 40). So, while the change in the Creature's body is expected, the change in Frankenstein's is not. As manufacturer Frankenstein is familiar with the body and yet his narrative prevaricates. He describes it but also likens it to a "mummy" (40). The narrative moves back and forth between distanced reflection and lasting emotional upset; it is punctuated by several narrative shifts. The story is told with hindsight but Frankenstein struggles to control his story and it is not clear when exactly the beautiful "thing" becomes a "catastrophe."

Frankenstein leaves the laboratory in a hurry: "Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room"; his emotions are "breathless horror and disgust" (39). Exhausted, he falls asleep only to be woken by the horrors of his dreams. It is then that he realizes that the Creature is looking at him and smiling. Very frightened, Frankenstein jumps out of bed and "rushed down stairs" (40). What scares him more than anything is the chance of speech (40). This section includes reflection and hindsight. Frankenstein never realizes nor admits (to Walton) that he has misread the Creature's expression. Judging from the description, "His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks" (40), the Creature was not going to attack. The power of speech, which foreshadows the Creature's ability to articulate his feelings, increases the Creature's capacity for agency and social interaction, which this scene intensifies as Frankenstein notices

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that the Creature reaches out to him. The repetition, first and second encounter in short succession, also intensifies his horror. So, rather than enter into a social situation with the Creature, Frankenstein states that he has to run to save himself. Recalling his obsession and decision to prioritise work over time spent with friends and family, we are left wondering if he preferred the immobile body because he did not have to interact with it.

Frankenstein's assessment of the body and subsequent rejection of the Creature resembles Lavater's physiognomical readings, because Lavater, too, preferred portraits to people. While a portrait for Lavater at least holds the features in perfect balance, its animated version makes a secure evaluation of character impossible. Thinking of the immobile and animated bodies in terms of two images representing the identity of the Creature helps to explain not only the injustice done to the Creature but also the bias of Frankenstein's story. Read against Lavater's physiognomical practice, Frankenstein, like a physiognomist, first looks at a portrait (immobile body) and then encounters the person it represents (animated body). The Creature is not what he expected it to be—beautiful and good. But Frankenstein so many would think, draws the wrong conclusion. Frankenstein, indeed, panics because the body moves and speaks but not in the way he had envisioned. Lack of interaction had guaranteed Frankenstein a position of control both as a scientist or inventor and a creative artist. The social situation he shares with Walton, the retelling of the event, evidences that he has lost narrative control and is trying to regain it.

In the context of the story, Frankenstein calms down only when he runs into Henry Clerval. Seeing Clerval has a positive effect: “his presence brought back to my thoughts my father, Elizabeth, and all those scenes of home so dear to my recollection. I grasped his hand, and in a moment forgot my horror and misfortune; I felt suddenly, and for the first time during many months, calm and serene joy” (Shelley 41). Shelley's description of Frankenstein regaining control over his emotions is littered with references to beautiful and familiar faces. The calming effect they have chimes with the physical connection that Lavater says exists between the observer and the observed: “*Our imagination operates upon our physiognomy*. It assimilates the face, in some measure, to the object of our love or hatred. [...] Our face is a mirror which reflects the objects for which we have a singular affection or aversion” (3: 182). Here, Clerval, a dear old friend, has been looking for him, and his arrival returns ‘love’ into Frankenstein's life and body. Shelley heightens the impact of the meeting by



introducing touch; that is, Frankenstein, who refused to touch the Creature, recognises his friend and embraces him.

The third meeting with the Creature takes place in the Alps. Regarding emotion, it starts with rage and horror and moves on to compassion. Seeing the Creature running towards him, Frankenstein tells Walton, “I trembled with rage and horror, revolving to wait his approach, and then close with him in mortal combat” (76). The scene in the Alps brings Shelley’s critique of Lavater’s practice into focus because, during the third encounter, the Creature, whose appearance (not his person) once again upsets Frankenstein, becomes an active participant in the process of observation and character scrutiny; the Creature prevents visual exposure and asks to be listened to: “‘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’” (Shelley 79).

Wanting to protect Frankenstein from the cold, the Creature invites him to go to a mountain hut where they can talk: “I followed. My heart was full, and I did not answer him; but, as I proceeded, I weighed the various arguments that he had used, and determined at least to listen to his tale. I was partly urged by curiosity, and compassion confirmed my resolution” (Shelley 79). In Frankenstein’s interior monologue “but” indicates the change in his track of thoughts. The non-visual information sways him, though not for long. As we know, Frankenstein would never finish the female body he promises to create. His reflections are equally revealing:

His words had a strange effect upon me. I compassionated him, and sometimes felt a wish to console him; but when I looked upon him, when I saw the filthy mass that moved and talked, my heart sickened, and my feelings were altered to those of horror and hatred. I tried to stifle these sensations; I thought, that as I could not sympathize with him, I had no right to withhold from him the small portion of happiness which was yet in my power to bestow. (121)

Frankenstein listens and is momentarily able to connect with the Creature. He feels for him. However, when he looks at his face, he sways back though not immediately and not completely. It is not clear how much time has passed. The account, again

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directed at Walton, includes traces of sympathy (in Smith’s sense) and therefore creates the impression that, this time, Frankenstein imagines himself in the Creature’s ‘situation.’ But again, Frankenstein speaks in hindsight as well as to Walton. He says that he wanted to help (Shelley 122). On the way down Frankenstein remembers what he saw, he undergoes a change of heart. It is the visual rather than the auditory that has a lasting effect on him: “Can you wonder [...] that I saw continually about me a multitude of filthy animals inflicting on me incessant torture, that often extorted screams and bitter groans?” (123). On the way back, the conversation as well as the promise dissolve into “screams” and “groans” and the visual wins out over the auditory. Frankenstein is overwhelmed and can no longer control his emotions.

Narration plays a central role in the novel’s demonstration of the failure of sympathy. Arguing for “compensatory compassion,” established through listening, Jeanne Britton writes that “Frankenstein parses sympathy’s elements and repeatedly makes the simultaneous alignment of physiological resemblance, visual experience, and auditory engagement impossible” (3). To highlight the complexity of the issue addressed by Britton, the final part of this essay analyses Walton’s assessment of the Creature, paying particular attention to the role of voice.

The Creature tried to argue his case with De Lacey and Frankenstein (in the Alps), thinking that his voice was not too bad. He was convinced that he could reason with his interlocutors but was proven wrong and had all but given up by the time he met Walton. In *Essays on Physiognomy*, Lavater explores the possibility of voice analysis. Voices, he writes, “are most frequently associated” with foreheads: “If you have any delicacy of ear, be assured that the sound of the voice will soon furnish you with infallible indications by which you may distinguish the class of the forehead, of the temperament, of the character” (Lavater 2: 419). He also coins the expression “*physiognomical ear*,” which, he says, many blind people have acquired, but admits that he has never mastered the “art of Music” (2: 240). Lavater’s writing on voice complements his ideas on appearance:

of every species of dissimulation, that of language, however refined it may be, is the most easily detected. But how is it possible to express, by signs, all the sounds of voice so prodigiously varied! We cannot even acquire the power of counterfeiting them; for the most part we disfigure them. (2: 240–1)

Lavater, in short, associates sound with truth and, therefore, with the original image he is searching for in the face he is analysing. If Shelley read Lavater, this passage would explain why De Lacey, who functions as an intermediary between Frankenstein and Walton,<sup>7</sup> is old as well as blind. De Lacey's treatment of the Creature foreshadows Walton's willed and controlled response at the end of the novel.

Whereas visual information dominates Frankenstein's meetings with the Creature, the meeting with Walton is guided by auditory information. Walton is writing a letter to his sister, but stops as he has heard a noise: "I am interrupted. What do these sounds portend? [...] Again; there is a sound as of a human voice, but hoarser; it comes from the cabin where the remains of Frankenstein still lie. I must arise, and examine" (Shelley 186). Walton senses danger but quickly associates the sounds with a human voice. On his return, he finishes his story, talking about a visually overpowering finale—"I am yet dizzy with the remembrance of it" (186)—, but he soon regains control and continues his letter, allowing his sister to *enter* into the social situation (in Smith's sense) he has just experienced.

Walton's account is much more immediate and, therefore, perhaps more truthful than Frankenstein's, but it also echoes the narrative strategies used by Frankenstein in the laboratory scene. Though lost for words, Walton securely identifies the Creature's deformed proportions, mentioning the now "long locks of ragged hair" (Shelley 187). His talk of the skin, which is wrinkled and discoloured "like that of a mummy" (187), confirms all of Frankenstein's descriptions. In the Arctic, however, the order of the description is reversed because the face comes last: "Never did I behold a vision so horrible as his face, of such loathsome yet appalling hideousness" (187). Walton is overwhelmed by the Creature's ugliness, but after looking him in the face, he says, he "involuntarily" shut his eyes (187). With his eyes shut, Walton tells his sister, he can think and remember his "duties" (187).

Walton calls out, asks the Creature to stay, and when he opens his eyes he begins to read the expressive body: "every feature and gesture seemed instigated by the wildest rage of some uncontrollable passion" (Shelley 187). He steps closer: "my first

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7 "The monster understands his own investment in his powers of eloquence and persuasion; he realizes that his fate depends on his ability to move others through a recital of his autobiography. He delays his appeal to the De Laceys until he has confidence in his mastery of their language" (Marshall 194). And: "The monster, of course, knows perfectly well that sight will not be adequate if the representation of his tragedy is to have any effect other than horror; it is for this reason that he first approaches the blind De Lacey" (195).

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impulses [...] were now suspended by a mixture of curiosity and compassion” (187). The idea of control is evoked by the notion of suspended emotions. Walton is able to approach but also decides to keep his eyes averted, knowing that this is the only way to stay in control: “I dared not again raise my looks upon his face, there was something so scaring and unearthly in his ugliness” (187). Again, he cannot speak; when he can, he confronts the Creature: the display of “stings of remorse” is wasted on him (187). Just as in the Alps, a conversation ensues and Walton feels compassion. In the Arctic, the interaction between the interlocutors, however, is completely different. The Creature howls for pain. Walton shrinks back but steps closer so that he can hear what the Creature has to say. He keeps his eyes averted and needs time to recover but is curious as well as impatient. When he is able to speak, they talk about revenge and remorse. The pace of Walton’s report is swift and Shelley, in fact, has Walton meet the Creature twice and in short succession, thus echoing the laboratory and bedroom scenes.

Impelled by the memory of Frankenstein’s narrative, Walton decides to take another look and promptly, so he tells his sister, “indignation was rekindled” (Shelley 188). Resentment, it turns out, is exactly what the Creature is feeling at this moment in time: “You hate me; but your abhorrence cannot equal that with which I regard myself. I look on the hands which executed the deed; I think on the heart in which the imagination of it was conceived, and long for the moment when they will meet my eyes, when it will haunt my thoughts no more” (190). The Creature agrees with Walton, declaring that he deserves to be hated. He confirms that his body ought to be read as a representation of moral depravity as well as of the evil deeds he has committed. This act of moral self-judgement does away with the two positions of observer and observed. The emotional distance between the narrator’s voice and its assessment gives weight to the finality of the judgement: the Creature is a monster. He has turned his eyes on to himself but remains in control. Addressing his maker, he says: “my agony was still superior to thine; for the bitter sting of remorse may not cease to rankle in my wounds until death shall close them for ever” (191).

Characteristic of all meetings discussed in this essay is excessive emotion in the observer. The Creature’s actions, by comparison, are deliberate and never spontaneous. While Frankenstein persists and pursues his agenda, which is to justify his actions, Walton is able to recognise and respect the Creature’s suffering. He manages his emotional response to appearance; he only reassures himself that what

he has been told is true. When Walton remembers that Frankenstein warned him of the Creature's eloquence, he briefly relapses into rage. Interestingly, the intensity of this emotion increases once he looks at the "lifeless form" of his "friend" Frankenstein (Shelley 188). This means that Shelley completely reverses the relationship between observer and observed. In the Arctic, rage is triggered by a corpse rather than a corpse-turned-animated body. Shelley, in short, turns Lavater's physiognomical practice on its head by working towards a scene which confirms otherness rather than likeness. It is the Creature who identifies his moral deviousness with his physical ugliness and Walton feels for the Creature, while disagreeing with Frankenstein. Agreement and feelings of recognition (signs of increasing self-knowledge, according to Lavater) are crucial to Lavater's practice (Erle 35–53).

Walton's decision to listen and to not look can be read as Shelley's critique of the physiognomy project but especially his approach and practice. Lavater never entered into a dialogue with the person whose character he was analysing and in *Frankenstein*, only by not looking, can Walton do the Creature justice. While the portraits discussed in *Essays on Physiognomy* had no chance to talk back, Shelley not only gives the Creature his own voice, she also has Frankenstein convey his point of view so that Walton can know both sides before he meets the Creature face-to-face. In the Arctic, the challenge to understand the Creature's situation in life is finally met. Acknowledging the hopelessness of the situation, Walton realises that he has nothing in common with Frankenstein. This disentanglement or breakdown of the relationship between observer and observed, so carefully triangulated by Shelley, is confirmed by the Creature because he does not expect or ask for sympathy: "‘But soon,’ he cried, with sad and solemn enthusiasm, ‘I shall die, and what I now feel be no longer felt. Soon these burning miseries will be extinct’" (191). The Creature defines himself through the emotions he feels inside his body as well as in relation to outside responses to his appearance. He experiences the physical identity imposed on him through his body, remembers his crimes but also says that his loneliness is unbearable. The Creature is a sentient being, capable of love and compassion and he has a will of his own. To find relief and protect himself from further humiliation, he says, he chooses to die and thus rid himself (his soul) of the body manufactured by Frankenstein.

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