"Worm Work: Recasting Levinasian Ethics"
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So we all know the story of *Frankenstein*, if not by reading the actual novel then definitely through a kind of cultural inheritance that has taught us about unintended consequences—about how what we create can quickly slip out of our control and come back to destroy us. Or, as my students often hear me rehearse it: Man creates man; but this man is a monster. Which man? Both.

What I mean, in part, is that our sympathies or antipathies easily oscillate between Victor Frankenstein and the monster because both display characteristics familiar to "us," the human reader: both are learned beings, yet Victor's biases lay in the sciences whereas the monster is conversant in the humanities; both reveal the importance of family, the need for community; and an aesthetic aversion to that unmistakable (albeit slippery) *other;* yet both share the human form, even granting that the monster's form is pieced together from material found in "slaughter houses and dissecting rooms" and stands "eight feet in height."

Admittedly, the very *idea* of Frankenstein is nothing if not commonplace today. Adaptations of the tale alone are innumerable, crossing easily from literature to film to stage, even to the campy Halloween costume or lovable plush toy, and suspiciously on to our dinner plates as genetically-modified foodstuffs, or "Frankenfoods"—and this ignores all the professional articles perpetually generated for coming up on 200 years (and perhaps has you, my reader, now tacitly groaning, "*oh no*, not *another* essay on *Frankenstein*"). The irony of such prolific concentration is of course found in the fact that the lessons espoused by the tale have yet to be fully absorbed. We, as humans, consistently reach for what Victor himself warns is a going "beyond what our nature will allow." We are ambitious. We are glory-hounds. We are, finally, creators. Even Mary Shelley sincerely bids her "hideous progeny go forth and prosper," condoning as she does so the very inventive processes she condemns through the mouth and actions of her protagonist.

What I want to focus on in this blog post, then, is the implicit question of ethics bound up in, only to escape from, the pages of Shelley's novel. However, the novel here acts merely as a platform on which to rehearse my broader argument considering how we encounter the *other*—how we interact with and even reflect this *other*, especially if this *other* is a **non-human animal**.

It's not a new question, to be sure. Nor is it a question that can be fully parsed in the next several paragraphs. But it is a question to which my own preliminary response might surprise you: we must turn away from this *other* in disgust.

Allow me to digress with a brief example: "Human-like brain found in worm." This was the headline run online by *DiscoveryNews* on September 2, 2010, preceding a subtitle that read, "For the first time, a structure comparable to our cerebral cortex has been found in an invertebrate—a humble marine ragworm." By placing a complex vertebrate in direct relation to a simple invertebrate, title and subtitle alike threaten a continued dismantling of the great distance heretofore separating high from low organisms on the chain of being. The suggested proximity of "human" and "worm" provokes in turn a largely pejorative reaction from writer and reader alike. As if the inserted adjective "humble" and the descriptive prefix "rag" were not enough to promote a sense of belittlement toward a worm conceivably six hundred million years our ancestor (and yet still our contemporary) and now understood to share brain structures that anticipate our own, the discussion thread appended to the main article offers up colorful reader responses that range from **contempt**:

- If you prefer to believe your brain is related to a worm, then so be it. Others have a higher regard for human life.
- Are you saying that we are worm-brain creatures?

to ridicule:

- Noooo! That headline is guaranteed to be cited by some religious nut as proof that evolution is a lie. I can hear it now: "How does eeeeevvvvillllllushun explain a human brain in a worm?!?! Scientisticals done wrote it themselves in that there scientistical magazine Discovery. Here look at it yourselves: Human-like brain found in a worm. My case is restful-like. God done created it all, periods!"

to indifference:

- And to think they are just worms . . .

and even to the cliché:

- And so the worm turns . . .

Human supremacy appears here to be as carefully guarded (if not as justly organized) as the pecking order of a henhouse. Through nothing more than the rhetoric that frames the summary of and reaction to a scientific study, this article displays an almost unconscious, seemingly inherited repulsion away from the worm. The worm emerges as a creature just

shy of a menacing presence; it challenges the supreme position of the human and so deserves our derision and scorn. In short, the worm is reviled not simply for what it is but for what it suggests about the nature of man.

If, as Levinas teaches, we must understand the human condition as an intrinsically *social* condition, one that contains the *irreducibly other*, the "utterly particular other person with whom I stand face to face" (Morgan, *Cambridge Intro* 3), then what happens when this "utterly particular other" is in fact a non-human animal, an invertebrate even, that is physiologically and aesthetically face-*less*? By looking at how the human organizes and represents his encounters with the worm, with an organism markedly *other* and irreducibly *othered*—given that it expressly denies the so-called face-to-face stance of Levinas' pluralistic philosophy, we can see how necessary it is to recast the definitions and valuations we assign not only to this lowly being but to ourselves (and, by extension, to our creations).

Furthermore, in keeping with the unique setting of this year's recent North American Levinas Society conference (held in Anchorage, Alaska), I am specifically concerned with the perhaps unexpected, though no less fundamental connection between worms, Frankenstein and his monster, and the arctic environment on which Shelley's own novel depends. Given that my present area of research is concerned with the intersections of literature and invertebrate zoology, I have grown increasingly interested in the way aesthetic (re)productions, such as Shelley's novel (including the "creature" it animates and the frozen setting it relies on), can unearth innovative ethical considerations both of and from largely face-less and archetypically base organisms.

It is also no coincidence that I am discussing the monster as if paired self-evidently to discussions of the worm: just as *in* the novel proper Victor witnesses "how the worm inherit[s] the wonders of the eye and brain," realizing how decay necessarily gives way to generation in order to then "bestow animation upon lifeless matter," Shelley owes the invention *of* her novel in large part to contemporary discussions (or even mere rumor) of Erasmus Darwin's real life vermicelli experiment, in which such "little worms" had been observed to come to life (as if spontaneously) in a paste-y combination of flour and water. In short, the existence of the monster can be traced back to extant worm work both inside and outside of the novel—thereby making the worm the very progenitor of the monster *and* the monstrous text. To claim the *other* in *Frankenstein*, then, is to acknowledge the vital juxtaposition of man and worm that structures the tale, a juxtaposition hinging on the confluence of difference and likeness—or, the threshold of scale responsible for pitting man *against* worm, i.e. the worm is at once *adversarial* (in contradiction of man) and *supportive* (situated alongside him).

Like Jonathan Crowe, in "Levinasian Ethics and Animal Rights," I am intrigued by how Levinas' seemingly ambiguous comments on the ethical status of animals—he might say, for example, "I don't know if a worm has a face. I can't answer that question because the human face is completely different" [qtd. in Crowe 315]—might be recalibrated toward an "Other-oriented" outlook, one that productively complicates "notions of alterity, proximity and the face" in order to arrive at a renewed sense of recognition and hence obligation (Crowe 314-316). To this end, my presentation today seeks merely to expand conversations about what Levinas articulates as "the crisis of humanism":

> The crisis of humanism in our age no doubt has its source in the experience of man's inefficacity, which the very abundance of our means for acting and the extent of our ambitions exhibits. (Levinas, "Humanism and An-archy," 1968)

According to Thomas Dutoit, in his essay "Re-specting the Face as the Moral (of) Fiction in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*," the "unnamed character is a 'monster' because it cannot show itself in the sense of *se montrer*." Unlike all other faces in the text, Shelley's monster remains unpresentable (Dutoit 847). Victor himself confirms such unpresentability immediately upon the monster's awakening; the "dull yellow opens" and Victor flees the scene, signaling in turn how repulsion always already carries with it a sense of confrontation.

With this do I return to my previous claim that to approach or encounter the non-human *other* dictates a paradoxical turning away. Victor's monster, like the ragworm, incites distance just as it encourages intimacy and reflection. The factitious being of the monster, like a ragworm's quasi cerebral cortex, is at once us and not-us, animal but non-human. It is an invention as abhorrent as it is engaging. But *ought it* matter? "Can we hope…," as Bettina Bergo examines in "The Face in Levinas," for a "thinkable" subject—an invested response to and responsibility for the dynamically un-faced face of our constructions?

Notably, the worm work in *Frankenstein* reveals a shift from material to moral decay; such citations or worm sightings move in the novel from those indicative of how humans become "food for the worm" to those that attest to, in particular, the "never-dying worm" that gnaws at Victor's conscience. It is important to remember that Victor recounts his "expedition of discovery" while dying on a ship confined by arctic ice. It is within this frozen and desolate environment that he is finally able to moralize his experiment. The curious shortsightedness he exhibited while working to complete his experiment (and, by macabre extension, while working to exterminate the same) is thus overridden not simply by any face-to-face confrontation between the monster and his maker but by the very act of retelling the tale from within an ostensibly unmoving, blank landscape. Furthermore, only when trapped, as it were, between life and death can Victor reflect clearly—beyond

his cultured myopia—on his deeds and their consequences. Thus is his dormant ethical sensibility awakened at the moment of life's extinguishing, as if to parody the selfsame epiphany that occurred—but to opposite effect—when the monster's life began. In other words, when the monster awoke Victor turned away in disgust and terror, but to tell the tale of this selfsame work Victor must face his revulsion, **and acknowledge an indisputable kinship**. The monster, then, can be read as a sublimated figure of culpability, one who "forces the society to articulate and redefine its understanding of 'human' and 'native'—and the practices *proper to* humanity—against the anomaly" (McLane, *Romanticism and the Human Sciences*, 91).

When Victor does finally sink beneath the weight of his existence, dying aboard Walton's icebound ship in the arctic, Shelley pointedly announces his impracticability as "prey for the worms." Given that the arctic locates Victor, along with Walton and the creature, in "the seat of frost and desolation," worms and their vitality (insofar as contemporary insect investigations lack any record of them in this region) no more exist in this environment than the decomposition associated with their presence. The body of Victor is conceivably preserved under these conditions; his body actualizes the deferred decay of his regretful survival, implying a suspension from the natural order and indeed making him the very monster of his own creation. He is, after the fashion of Jill Robbins' articulation of the "face" in *Altered Reading*, revelatory of the "infinite alterity of the other who… commands ethical responsibility or response." Unlike Robbins, however, I believe that the apparently petrified or *frozen* face of Victor engenders rather than stifles the ethical at the level of its condition of possibility (Robbins 49).

With the disastrous leanings not only of the creature but also of Walton neatly tied off by the novel's close, and Victor's dissolution put, as it were, on hold, any threat of regeneration, of violence, appears to be thwarted. Walton, the adventurer, relinquishes his quest; with "hopes blasted by cowardice and indecision, [he] come[s] back ignorant and disappointed," his purpose unfulfilled. No monster is left to promote wretchedness or to reproduce, with Malthusian horror, "a race of devils . . . propagated upon the earth." And Victor leaves neither kin nor protégé. Again, however, Victor does leave behind his body, and it is on this petrified ruin that I submit the whole of the novel, and our experience of it, ultimately depends. Like Victor, who has built his monster from the decayed remnants of both material bodies and bodies of knowledge, Shelley can be said to have constructed her novel on the frozen, human face of Victor. Like the monster, Victor is invented by the narrative. Unlike the monster, Victor is positioned in *Frankenstein* as the lasting material reflection of narrative itself. The arctic freeze promotes our final turning away from worm work; but in doing so it highlights *rejection* as the very thing that enables us to face that which we, by definition, cannot.

All this talk of worms and the non-human animal admittedly displays an insurmountable anthropocentrism, a locus of the human that pits *us* against *them* by disclosing the irony of holistic formulations. But there is also a correspondingly inescapable biocentrism, or deep ecological current, running beneath such formulations. Because, as Giorgio Agamben has claimed, man historically recognizes himself in the "non-man in order to be human," confronting the deceptively lowly worm affords us the opportunity to see continuity where we would only see opposition and disruption. The causative value of this invertebrate therefore reveals the non-human to be that which restricts the human to, just as it emancipates the human from, the animal that it is. And this, finally, is what *ought to* turn Levinas' ambiguity into an embrace.

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