

## FRANKENSTEIN'S READER AS JUDGE AND CONFIDANT

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*This article examines the tension between two modes of listening presented in Frankenstein. Characters sometimes receive others' stories as a confidant responsible to the storyteller and sometimes as a judge responsible to a predetermined ethical norm. Drawing on the ideas of Emmanuel Lévinas, the article shows how these two forms of listening correspond to two ethical models – the ethics arising from the face-to-face encounter and the ethics arising from an imagined totality of ethical norms. Each of these ethical modes is evoked by the act of reading as readers are positioned by the text as both second-person addressee (the “you” to whom the novel seems to speak) and third-person judge (a he or she with no relation to the text). Although these two ethical modes are present in all acts of novel reading, Frankenstein dramatizes the tension between them by contrasting intimate listening scenes with institutionalized scenes, affirmative acts of listening and dismissive acts of listening, written stories as evidence and spoken stories as the conduit of friendship. Comparing the novel's multiple representations of characters receiving another's story, the article explores the novel's emphasis on being heard as a central part of being human.*

With regard to Justine Moritz, Victor Frankenstein's father recommends “rely[ing] on the justice of the judges.”<sup>1</sup> As Garrett Stewart points out in his exploration of “the conscripted reader” in nineteenth-century fiction, *Frankenstein* constructs a “reader whose attention alone fulfills the communicative and confessional impulses of the character.”<sup>2</sup> We readers are the judges with whom

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from *Frankenstein* in this article follow the text of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein: The 1818 Text, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. J. Paul Hunter (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012). The quoted passage is on p. 53 of this edition. Subsequent page references appear in parentheses in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Garrett Stewart, *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore, MD, and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) 116.

justice lies. As the only assured recipients of the letters Walton sends, we are the only ones capable of assembling the story. But the setting of a death-bed confession and the language of friendship between Walton and Frankenstein suggest that we are also responsible for the act of receiving the story that comes prior to any judgment.

Consequently, the dual position that the reader of any novel always occupies as judge and confidant is foregrounded and converted into a central tension within the text of Shelley's novel. Furthermore, the reader's dual position as Victor Frankenstein's judge and confidant is reflected intradiegetically in Frankenstein's position as the creature's judge and confidant. One of the main things the text invites readers to judge is the way that Frankenstein judges the creature's presentation of his own life, and his request for a companion. This article examines how the novel, through its presentation of multiple scenes of storytelling and story-reception, constructs readers, on the one hand, as judges with a third-person perspective on a case, and on the other hand, as responsible confidants engaged as second-person addressee. *Frankenstein* highlights the divisibility of these two ethical processes and the tension that can exist between them, privileging in the end the ethics of reception over any act of judgment that might follow.

*Frankenstein* dramatizes readers' encounters with the text as judge and addressee through its structure and through the contrast of various settings. In one way, it presents Frankenstein's story as a series of testimonies from different characters about the events portrayed: Elizabeth's letters, the creature's account of his own life, his father's letters and the extensive captured speech of Clerval, Elizabeth and Justine. This amalgamation of texts and testimony suggests that readers are positioned as figures comparable to the Geneva magistrate or to Justine's jury. We compare stories, collate evidence and determining the categories through which a person may be punished. The description of Justine's trial, Victor's trial, and Victor's confession to the magistrate thematize the reader's role as judge. And yet, in the intimacy of Walton's cabin, the image of the depleted Frankenstein on his death bed suggests a very different relationship between storyteller and addressee than would ever be cultivated in court. It has the sacredness of final confidences. There is a tension, then, between the acts of judgment and comparison invited between the apparent combination of multiple testimonies, and the acts of empathy and non-judgmental reception invited by Frankenstein's long confiding monologue, which makes up most of the body of the text.

There is, of course, another level of narration here, too. The entire story is packaged as Walton's written address to his sister/the reader. The tension of

intimate addressee and third-person judge is present here, through the format of letter writing. The intradiegetic letter-format and the extradiegetic printed novel format both suggest the distance one can have with a text. We can put it down, come back to it, return to a specific part and think through it again. The textuality of the confession, its mediation through Walton, and the fact that it is addressed to Walton's sister Margaret all counter the impression that we are the other to whom Frankenstein's story is addressed. The section of the novel in which Frankenstein recounts his story mentions Walton's presence just frequently enough that we are forced to recall that the face-to-face dialogue that the novel presents as having happened, happened in a time and place that readers were no part of. The intimacy of a spoken deathbed confession never escapes its confines within a text set adrift, its connection to the spoken voice of Frankenstein or Walton broken and its destination undetermined.

I find Emmanuel Lévinas's ideas fruitful for thinking about this dual position as second-person addressee and third-person observer. Lévinas continually evokes the face-to-face encounter as the site of ethics. For him, responsibility arises in our proximity to another person. In response to the nakedness and vulnerability of the face, we are called to pour ourselves out with no expectation of return, not even gratitude. Ethics does not precede that moment, but comes forth within it again and again and again as we encounter other people. Because his ethics arises through the situation of second-person address, the arrival of a third person creates problems for Lévinas. I cannot attend to the responsibility that arises in my encounter with one other, if the face of some new other is also there with his demand for responsibility. In such a situation, "How can one judge?" Lévinas asks in *Alterity and Transcendence*. "How to compare others – unique and incomparable?"<sup>3</sup> And yet, faced with conflicting demands for responsibility for two people, I must become judge. Inevitably, "In justice there is comparison, and the other has no privilege with respect to me."<sup>4</sup>

Lévinas attempts to overcome this ethical problem through an appeal to rights and specifically the right of the other person. Whether that appeal succeeds or not is a question for another time. What is useful for thinking about reading is the way that Lévinas sets up the contrast between two forms of ethical engagement – engagement as addressee and engagement as judge. As long as we engage one person at a time, judgment has no place in Lévinas's ethics, but as soon as a third person arrives, we are caught between the second-person ethics

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone Press, 1999) 102.

<sup>4</sup> Lévinas 102.

of address and the third-person position of one who can imagine a totality beyond the particular moment of relationality and the particular others involved.

As mentioned already, reading any literary work involves shifting back and forth between the position of second-person addressee and third-person judge. A text commands our attention in a way that resembles another person speaking to us. Like another person, it has an alterity that resists our will, our expectations and our powers of conceptualization. It demands that we direct our attention toward according to its shifting focus. And yet, unlike another person, it has no body, and therefore no pain or desire in which we could intervene. There is no way for us to affect the characters or situations we read about, and so we are also positioned by a text as a third-person judge, fit to compare and evaluate. In a passage that perhaps has not been thought about enough, Lévinas finds the possibility of a totality that is not totalitarian on a comparison between reading the world and reading a text. He suggests that there could be “[a] notion of totality and intellect that would lead to the understanding of all experience, and perhaps all reasoning of things, according to the model of the interpretation of texts.”<sup>5</sup> This model for him is the hermeneutic circle of interpreting a part in relation to the whole and constantly changing one’s interpretation of the whole as one encounters new parts of a text. If there is a parallel practice in Lévinas’s ethics, then it would be, I think, the movement between the other’s personal calling of us into responsibility and the imagined whole of a world that contains other others to whom we also must be responsible. Reading a text not only provides a model for thinking about the tension between the ethic of a momentary encounter and the tendency toward totalization, but it also dramatizes the way that such an ethical process works, through its positioning of readers as at once addressee of an other and judge who interprets that other in light of a projected totality.

In the case of a novel, that totality is a composite of the reader’s projection of a total world and the book’s projection of that world for our benefit. Since even the least realistic books become meaningful in relation to the extra-textual world, the givenness of that world as it is revealed to us in our historical and cultural particularity likewise affects the interpretation of a textual world and is affected by it. Those moments when the imagined totality of the world in which we typically move and live and have our being conflict with the totality of the world projected by the text *highlight* the gap between the world projected by a text and the world projected by our intentionality, but these two totalities are never fully separable because of their constant interpretive interplay. Any notion of totality

<sup>5</sup> Lévinas 49.

that we construct as readers becomes, as Lévinas says, a “totalization that is ever to be renewed anew, an open notion of totality!”<sup>6</sup> A specific encounter with another person is one part within the whole of possible encounters. A reading of one text is one part within a reading life. An encounter with the text as other is one part of our future-oriented perspective on possible encounters with real, human others. The position of judge, the third-person position represents our orientation toward a totality. We can, as judge when reading, contemplate the totality proposed by a text in relation to our prior ethical commitments, but that totality can always be forced to alter itself by the demand of the text as speaking other. We are never fully judge, but also second-person addressee.

Victor struggles to determine the most ethical response to the creature’s demands, in part, because the creature simultaneously occupies the positions of victim, villain and witness on his own behalf. The categories that Victor would use as judge each fail to capture fully the nature of the creature’s action, particularly when those actions are recognized as arising, not out of an imagined autonomous subjectivity, but out of relationships. He has been abandoned by Frankenstein who he looks to as a father. He is repeatedly prejudged based on his appearance, and as a consequence of that pre-judgment, Felix and the companion of the girl he saves both physically attack him. He is, from the moment he is born, a victim. But when Frankenstein hears the creature recount that he not only killed William but also gloated over the child’s murder, it kindles “anew [...] the anger that had died away while he narrated his peaceful life among the cottagers” (100-101). He judges him to be a villain. And of course, with no one else to tell his story for him, the creature must be his own witness. He gives his testimony to Frankenstein as second-person addressee and hopes for compassion, but he also knows that Frankenstein will be his judge and grant or refuse his request for a companion on the basis his own juxtaposition of his plea against a larger projected totality of ethical behaviour.

It is this back and forth between the creature’s particular demands and the ethical demands of the rest of humankind that Shelley prioritizes in her portrayal of Frankenstein’s acts of judgment. “There was some justice in his argument,” Frankenstein recounts, after hearing the creature portray the peaceful life he expects for himself and his companion, and after thinking further, he concludes “that the justice due to both him and my fellow-creatures demanded of me that I should comply with his request” (102-104). This language shows Frankenstein trying to reconcile the demands of the individual to whom he is speaking with

<sup>6</sup> Lévinas 49.

the demands of an ethical field that he imagines to encompass all of humanity. He uses the same language when reflecting on his own behaviour to Walton:

In a fit of enthusiastic madness I created a rational creature, and was bound toward him, to assure, as far as was in my power, his happiness and well-being. This was my duty; but there was another still paramount to that. My duties toward my fellow-creatures had greater claims to my attention.

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The contrast Frankenstein recognizes between his duties to the other, the creature addressing him, and the ethical totality of his "fellow-creatures" is set alongside another process that foregrounds the proximity of Frankenstein to his creature and the immediate opportunity he has to relieve some part of the creature's suffering. This is Frankenstein's engagement with his creature in the second-person, as an addressee, summoned to responsibility, as Lévinas would have it, in the face-to-face encounter. "I compassionated him," he recalls, "and sometimes felt a wish to console him" (103). It seems that Frankenstein is recognizing that call to responsibility that Lévinas describes the other evoking. It seems that he knows that in that moment, he is the only person who can answer the need for compassion the creature expresses. But then he continues "when I looked upon him, when I saw the filthy mass that moved and talked, my heart sickened, [...]. I could not sympathize with him" (103). As judge, Frankenstein determines that he has "no right to withhold" (103) from the creature a companion, but as a companion himself, as the other the creature addresses, he fails. He cannot provide the compassion that every human demands of another in the face-to-face exchange. In part because the thing before him seems to him a "filthy mass" rather than a *someone* like himself. In the novel, then, ethics in the third-person, ethics that calls for categorizing people as villain, victim, witness or judge, that calls for comparison between the person facing us and the ethical demands that may be evoked in the future in the vast possibility of other encounters, is set in dynamic tension with ethics in the second-person, the face-to-face encounter of being addressed.

Readers, like Frankenstein himself, face a not quite human mass of composite material in facing this text and are invited to be both judge and addressee. The character of Frankenstein, who addresses us through Walton, conflates, like his creature, the positions of villain, victim and witness. First and sole originator of the creature, he is the ultimate source of his crimes. As brother to William, friend to Clerval and husband to Elizabeth, he experiences victimization. He fulfils the

role of witness as someone who has lived through something and as someone who can give account.<sup>7</sup> When he lays the evidence of his life before Walton, readers, too, are invited to judge his behaviour. The reader's position as judge, however, exists somewhat independently from his position as addressee. The novel's structure of a conversation (Frankenstein and the creature's) within a conversation (Frankenstein and Walton's) within a letter (Walton to Margaret and the reader) emphasizes the different kinds of listener or reader one can be. Specifically, seeing Frankenstein's own failure of sympathy toward the person addressing him invites readers to be a different kind of addressee for Frankenstein/Walton's story.

In order to clarify the nature of this difference, I want to turn to Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's conception of why having an engaged addressee is important, even constitutive. Felman and Laub contend, with regard to Holocaust survivors, that "the absence of an *addressable other*, an other who can hear the anguish of one's memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness" leads to an annihilation of the self. The absence of someone to hear one's story destroys not only the possibility for the story to come forth, but the possibility for the survivor to construct a story for him or herself at all.<sup>8</sup> When "one cannot turn to a 'you' one cannot say 'thou' even to oneself [...]. This loss of the capacity to be witness to oneself and thus to witness from the inside is perhaps the true meaning of annihilation."<sup>9</sup> I think Kelly Oliver is right to see this reliance on an external witness as a property of human subjectivity generally. We cannot say "I" until we are a "you" to someone else. Oliver summarizes this by imagining an "inner witness." "Dialogue with others," she writes, "makes dialogue with oneself possible. In order to think, talk and act as an agent, the inner witness must be in place."<sup>10</sup> Frankenstein's creature dramatizes the problem of being deprived of an addressable other and the violence of the outcomes that lack can produce. He has been consistently deprived of dialogue with others. When he demands that Frankenstein make him a companion, he longs for precisely the kind of addressable other Felman and Laub describe, someone who can "hear the anguish of one's memories" and "recognize their

<sup>7</sup> These are the definitions of witnessing extrapolated by Giorgio Agamben in his discussion of the etymology of testimony. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999) 17-18.

<sup>8</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 68.

<sup>9</sup> Felman and Laub 82.

<sup>10</sup> Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) 87.

realness." He pleads, "Let me see that I excite the sympathy of some existing thing" (102).

The novel frames this longing for an addressable other chiefly through the figure of listening. More than anything the creature demands of his maker that he hear him. "I entreat you to hear me," he says. "Listen to my tale: when you have heard that, abandon or commiserate me [...]. But hear me [...]. Listen to me, [...]" (68), and again "listen to me [...]. Still thou canst listen to me [...]. Hear my tale" (69). Before the sun sets, "you will have heard my story, and can decide" (69). All this on the first two pages of the creature's story. Although Frankenstein does in the end spend that day with the creature, his first response is "Begone! I will not hear you. There can be no community between you and me" (68). Through the creature's persistent demands and Frankenstein's association of being heard with participation in community, Shelley signals the associations between being heard and being human, being heard and being in community, being heard and being good. When Frankenstein consents to listen to the creature's tale, we see the creature respond in kindness even though Frankenstein himself does not acknowledge it. The creature brings him to a hut because he realizes that the cold of the mountainside is not suited to his creator's "fine sensations" (69). Frankenstein relates that he sat himself "by the fire which" his "odious companion had lighted" (70). The creature has made the fire as a response to Frankenstein's willingness to listen. When Frankenstein has finished listening to the creature's tale, we see again that the creature strives to be kind. "Begone," Frankenstein has said to him, but rather than responding with violence or impatience, the creature replies "I am content to reason with you" (101-102).

The pattern of the creature's being kind after being listened to and being violent when he is not repeats itself throughout his narrative. Old man De Lacey listens to him, and the creature feels he has been raised "from the dust by this kindness" (94). The scene is staged as a scene of mutual recognition. The creature is never closer to being recognized as an equal human subject than when the elder De Lacey entrusts him with judging the De Lacey's past misfortune. He is the only one who ever credits the creature with the capacity to judge. He further acknowledges that the creature is a "who" and not a "what" when he asks him asks him "Who are you?" (94) The creature's dream of making those who he thought of as friends, his friends really and truly seems about to come true. This could be an opportunity for the creature to tell his own story and an opportunity for him to be another's addressee and judge. But when Felix attacks him without hearing that story, the creature declares "everlasting war on the species" of humankind (95).