

## **Race and the Human-Origins Debate in *Frankenstein***

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Discussions of how *Frankenstein* might have been shaped by Mary Shelley's relationship with the comparative physiologist William Lawrence - the Shelleys' friend and personal physician - have quite reasonably focused on contemporary debates between vitalists and materialists. Lawrence was involved in a notorious controversy with his mentor at the Royal College of Surgeons over whether what differentiated animate from inanimate matter was better explained theologically or materialistically. Lawrence argued for the latter, asserting that life could be minimally and tentatively defined as "the system of relations between the functions of the organs making up an organism," and that all "metaphysical concerns" should be "uncoupled" from "the practical study of life science" (Gigante, 162). This purely functionalist definition of the vital principle led to his being denounced by the *Quarterly Review*, whereupon the ensuing outrage eventually forced him to withdraw his printed volume of public lectures. And thus, when Victor Frankenstein states, vaguely but suggestively, that the secret involving "the change from life to death, and death to life" breaks over him as "a light so brilliant and wondrous, yet so simple" (*Frankenstein* 34), it seems natural to credit the vitalism-materialism debate as a compelling influence upon the novelist. Meanwhile, in regard to matters of race, much energy has been profitably spent in attempts to determine what contemporary literary and visual depictions of non-Caucasians might have most significantly contributed to the physical constitution of the Creature - if, for instance, he is an amalgam of numerous racist accounts of enslaved Africans (Mulvey-Roberts 63-7, 70) or a figure for those subjugated in Jamaica specifically (Malchow 92-5, 106-13), or if he embodies fearful speculations about various "rising" Asiatic peoples (Mellor 10-23), or if he is a Romantic-era revenant of Caliban (Allan Lloyd Smith 210-12).

And yet, Lawrence was deeply and publicly involved with another intellectual controversy - one which had been ongoing for several centuries - and which had a direct bearing on Romantic notions of which races counted as fully human. The Shelleys' physician was at the time of the novel's writing the main British proponent of the monogenist theory of human origins - the idea that all the morphologically distinct races of human beings were to be understood as members of the same species of animal, descended from a common ancestor. Arrayed against Lawrence were a (quickly rising) number of polygenists, i.e., those who contended that the different races of mankind had arisen - whether by divine creation or wholly natural processes - in geographic and temporal isolation from each other, and thus constituted, taxonomically, several distinct species. Though it has received only passing attention, this monogenist-polygenist controversy lies strongly and strangely at the heart of *Frankenstein*, for readers witness Victor actually *commit* an act of polygenesis, as well as listen to him argue for that position throughout the remainder of the text, while the Creature's - and much of the novel's - countervailing rhetoric throughout Volumes II and III urges the Monster's monogenic kinship with the bulk of mankind. Thus, while the Creature is in many ways metaphorically Adamic, the novel entertains a debate about whether he can rightfully proclaim Adam - or, alternatively, any secularly-conceived primordial ancestor - as his and Victor's common progenitor. So inconclusive is this debate that Patrick Brantlinger is left to ask in exasperation, "so is the monster human, or does he belong to 'a new species'" (134)? As will become clear, however, Shelley represents this contest not

primarily to champion a partisan position within it (though she likely possesses one), but to point out, with equal exasperation, how little practical influence its supposedly antipodal conceptions have in shaping racial attitudes and actions toward racial others in daily life. Part of *Frankenstein*'s tragic stalemate thus results from the fact that in the world of the text theory seems powerless to affect behaviour.

The close relationship between the Shelleys and Sir William Lawrence is well-documented and may be quickly reviewed. Percy likely met the doctor and public intellectual as early as 1811, when he attended anatomy lectures given by Dr. John Abernethy (Lawrence's teacher and eventual opponent in the vitalism-materialism debate) at St. Bartholomew's Hospital (Mellor 9-10) and was consulting him on personal medical issues as early as 1815 (Mulvey-Roberts 82). According to Marilyn Butler, by the end of that year both Mary and Percy were reading "steadily in the classics and, no doubt with the benefit of advice from Lawrence, [took up again] the reading programme in the physical sciences" which Percy had fitfully begun two years before. Indeed, says Butler, it is likely the doctor "guided the couple's reading in the physical sciences from the time they became partners in 1814 to the moment of the novel's emergence" (xii, xvi). This close familiarity between the married pair and the physician is confirmed by Sharon Ruston, who points to epistolary evidence "demonstrate[ing] that the Shelleys were in direct contact with Lawrence at the height of his debate with Abernethy on the nature of life" (90). Thus, there can be little doubt that Mary Shelley was acquainted with aspects of Lawrence's thought that extended beyond the vitalist-materialist controversy. Butler herself asserts that whereas "the first volume [of *Frankenstein*] . . . employ[s] little more of Lawrence than his critique of Abernethy, the second and third use other parts of Lawrence's work, drawing strength from his impressive intellectual range," though Butler provides few specifics (xxx). In what follows, I mean to investigate the integration of those "other parts" into *Frankenstein*.

Lawrence's 1819 *Lectures on Physiology, Zoology, and the Natural History of Man* is a compendium of addresses he delivered at the Royal College of Surgeons over the preceding years, years which encompass Mary Shelley's writing of *Frankenstein*. In it, the surgeon reveals his participation in the monogenist-polygenist contention, and stakes out a position within that debate concerning human prehistory that is more central to his thinking than the materialist views on the origins of organic life that so outraged the *Quarterly*:

Is there one species of men only, or are there many distinct ones? What particulars of external form and inward structure characterise the several races? What relation is observed between the differences of structure and those of moral feeling, mental powers, capability of civilization, and actual progress in arts, sciences, literature, government? How is man affected by the external influences of climate, food, way of life? Are these, or any others, operating on beings originally alike, sufficient to account for all the diversities hitherto observed; or must we suppose that several kinds of men were created originally, each for its own situation? (*Lectures* 120)

Eventually we learn that "the particular and general results of [his] inquiries lead [him] plainly to the conclusion that the various races of human beings are only to be regarded as varieties of a single species" (271). Human beings, like the dogs and cattle they domesticate, may be shaped by forces outside their control into "breeds" or "types" which strongly differ in appearance and aptitudes, but for all that, "the human species .

. . . like that of the cow, sheep, horse, and pig, and others, is single; and . . . all the differences, which it exhibits, are to be regarded merely as varieties" (547-8). As will become evident, the issue of whether the Creature, so morphologically different from his creator, embodies a mere difference of variety or one of taxonomic species is vigorously contested throughout the pages of *Frankenstein* (Brantlinger 134-5).

The roots of the monogenist-polygenist debate can be traced back to the medieval and even the classical world. Consider, for instance, Pliny the Elder's "monstrous races" living, as his *Natural History* suggests, just beyond the margins of the known world, and possessing bodies that, like that of the Creature, are scrambled versions of the human norm, or which boast some kind of hypertrophic aspect. In later centuries Pliny enjoyed a host of credulous admirers among the medieval scholastics, many of whom passed on his pseudo-anthropologies with hardly a modification. Perhaps the most significant of these acolytes was Albertus Magnus (Hodgen 67-8, 416-17), one of the young Victor's first "preceptors" whom he "read and studied" with "the greatest avidity" and "delight," such that his enthusiasm for that scholastic remains undiminished by his father's denunciation of his writings as "sad trash" (23). Even more suggestive, then, is the lightning-strike scene, which "completed the overthrow of Cornelius Agrippa, Albertus Magnus, and Paracelsus, who had so long reigned the lords of [his] imagination," but which also contains Victor's addendum that he afterwards continued to "read Pliny and Buffon with delight" (25, 26). The inclusion of Paracelsus and Buffon in the shifting pantheon above suggests that Victor's interest in the possible speciation of the races extends beyond classical and scholastic figures, for the latter pair took differing sides in the monogenic-polygenic debate during an era when actual European contact with non-Caucasian peoples energized and agonized what had hitherto been armchair exercise into a debate with weighty global consequences (Justin Smith 91-4).

For early-modern thinkers such as Paracelsus the shock of reading accounts by Europeans who had come into contact with various New World peoples led them to posit a primordial world and an origin of human (or human-like) beings that diverged from the supposedly Mosaic account accepted as orthodox - and indeed, as theologically central - by Catholic and Protestant authorities alike. Since, for instance, there appeared to be no mention of Amerindians in the Bible, their by now undeniable presence prompts Paracelsus to declare that:

[t]he children of Adam did not inhabit the whole world. That is why some hidden countries have not been populated by Adam's children, but through another creature, created like men outside of Adam's creation. For God did not intend to leave them empty, but had populated the miraculously hidden countries with other men. (quoted in Slotkin 42)

Turning to Shelley's Creature, one sees that he lives most of his existence as the representative, or the figure, of just such a hidden race. Although he seems capable of living in many climes, he comes to consciousness in a state of solitude, spends his early career roaming about unbeknownst to humanity at large, and successfully hides himself in close proximity to the DeLaceys for months until his catastrophic attempt to make himself known to them. Subsequent to this reversal, he inhabits "the desert mountains and dreary glaciers" (75) where only Victor's remorseful alpinism can eventually discover him. And so, for much of the book, he is an undiscovered nation of one, whose sudden appearance before European eyes causes a hostile consternation similar to that occasioned in Caucasian conquistadors by their first sightings of New World peoples.

Of course, all polygenic explanations of racial difference are, from the Christian perspective, unscriptural and heretical, as was quickly and vehemently pointed out from the moment thinkers like Paracelsus and Giordano Bruno began enunciating such ideas. One polygenist (and believer in the existence of pre-Adamic peoples) who came in for particular opprobrium was Issac La Peyrère (1596-1676), and this despite the fact that his earnestly pious aim was to harness observed racial diversity in an attempt to unknot some logical problems in Genesis and St. Paul, and to reconcile scriptural history with the chronologies of the Mesopotamians, the Egyptians, and other ancient peoples - which seemed to stretch back farther than the date at which Biblical scholars had fixed the day of Creation (Livingston, *Ancestors* 26-51). As to the conundrums in the Bible's initial book that polygenesis might solve, William Lawrence himself mentions God's creation of male and female before that of Eve herself, the mysterious provenance of Cain's wife, and the prior existence of a populated "land of Nod" to which Cain can be banished (note, 168-9). LaPeyrère's scripturally preservative intentions, however, did nothing to limit orthodox condemnations of the pre-Adamist, as "at least a dozen important treatises [were published] in the latter half of the seventeenth century seeking to refute [his] thesis" (Justin Smith 103). In their view, this well-meaning scholar had as good as declared that in order to save Genesis it would be necessary to destroy it.

It is therefore probable that the inherently corrosive effects of polygenism on Scriptural authority made Lawrence's participation in the monogenist-polygenist debate every bit as interesting to both the Shelleys as were his vitalist controversies - though perhaps especially so to the author of "The Necessity of Atheism" and "Queen Mab." It should be noted that the German monogenist and comparative physiologist, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach - whose English translator was none other than Lawrence - noted that "the idea of the plurality of human species has found particular favour with those who made it their business to throw doubt on the accuracy of Scripture" (98, cited in Justin Smith 255). I mention this not to suggest that either Mary or Percy would have been convinced by the polygenic position, but to underscore that the larger debate between mono- and polygenists likely engaged their creative attentions and seconded their existing ideas, especially about Biblical claims to historicity.

Another inevitable implication of (and/or impetus for) polygenic thought is virulent racism. And, while my own argument will rest upon the fact that, historically, the monogenist position rarely prevented its proponents from holding deeply racist attitudes, everyone intuitively understands that the line between polygenism and strident racism is intellectually and emotionally shorter and more direct than the one between monogenism and the same. For, as Scott Juengel puts it, while "both models read racial diversity as a graduated continuum, . . . polygenesis insists that the designation of skin color represents a fixed and ordained mark of biological distinction rather than," as with monogenesis, being the result of "historical adaptation" and a gradual "migration away from Edenic perfection" (902). In fact, as early as 1680 - four years after LaPeyrère's death - one can already hear complaints from European defenders of indigenous Africans and Amerindians that their opponents are using polygenism to promote economically convenient apologetics for slavery (Popkin 146). This association of a speciated theory of human origins and a steeply hierarchical conception of race only grew more common during the following century, and was expressed even by supposed champions of rational enlightenment such as Voltaire, who declared that "it's the same with men as with trees," for just as "pear-trees, pines, oaks, and apricot trees don't come from the same tree," so "the bearded whites, woolly Negroes, the downy yellows and the beardless men haven't descended from the same man," and that, furthermore, whites are "superior to these blacks, just as these blacks

are to the apes and as the apes to are to oysters" (7, 27). We know that both Mary and Percy were readers of Voltaire (Feldman & Scott-Kilvert 682; Butler xv), and nor is it likely that they escaped an encounter with the polygenic ideas of the (then) equally celebrated Lord Kames, who also declared that the differences between human racial groups were as large as that between distinct species of animals: "certain tribes differ visibly from each other, no less than the lama and pacos from the camel or from the sheep, not less than the true tiger from the American animals of that name" (9). Kames' outrageous claim that this human speciation must have occurred simultaneously with the destruction of the Tower of Babel demonstrates that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a polygenic outlook was frequently wedded to *some* sort of stance toward Biblical inerrancy - sometimes hostile, sometimes ingeniously obsequious.

There were others, however, who deployed polygenesis as a justification for the system of slavery from which they themselves benefited economically. One influential such voice was that of Edward Long, whose *Candid Reflections* (1772) upon the Somerset case informs us of "the impossibility of clearing and cultivating the soil" of sugar plantations "by any other than Negro labourers," since the "Negroes . . . whose constitutions being by nature and the Divine Will appropriated to these climates, . . . are evidently the fittest for such employments there" (21). Then, bolstering expedience with theory in his subsequent *History of Jamaica* (1774), Long asks:

When we reflect on the nature of these [black] men, and their dissimilarity to the rest of mankind, must we not conclude, that they are a different species of the same *genus*?

. . . . The measure of the several orders and varieties of these Blacks may be as compleat as that of any other race of mortals; filling up that space, or degree, beyond which they are not destined to pass; and discriminating them from the rest of men, not in *kind*, but in *species*. (2: 356, 375)

But, here is precisely where we must be on guard against convenient and comforting generalizations, for the complicated fact is that now and again one finds polygenists explicitly opposed to the slave trade, such as the Manchester physician Charles White. In his *Account of the Regular Gradations in Man* (1799), White finds his case for reading racial difference as evidence of speciation (and for concluding that "another race of mankind besides that descended from Adam, seem implied in the text" of Genesis) by pointing to supposedly measurable differences between the skull cavities of different racial specimens, thereby becoming the inspiration for an army of racist osteo-metricians in the following century. Simultaneously, however, he declares himself "persuaded [that] the Slave trade is indefensible on any hypotheses" and claims that he would "rejoice at its abolition" (136-137). And then too, recall that both Voltaire and Kames were equally opposed to slavery, despite their opinion of the non-white races' essential non-humanity. Finally, it is the case that some pro-slavery advocates wanted nothing to do with the blasphemous notion of multiple Adams because they believed it led people to ignore what they saw as the well-established literalist justification for slavery in the Bible, commonly involving the curse laid upon Ham (Livingstone, "Preadamite" 35). Thus, while advocating a polygenic origin of the races implied almost by definition that one envisioned a steep racial hierarchy, such a profession did not automatically make one an apologist for the lash. No more than, as we shall see, being a monogenist like William Lawrence automatically divested one of deeply racist assumptions.

Monogenesis was (at least until the flood of scientific racisms in the nineteenth century) always the most prevalent theory concerning human origins, whether one's view was religious or secular. In the century prior to *Frankenstein's* publication, a partial list of those who defended or articulated a monogenist account of human beginnings included Buffon (one of Victor's intellectual heroes), Cuvier, Lamarck, Montesquieu, Diderot, Kant, Blumenbach, Samuel Stanhope Smith, Herder, and Coleridge. However, anyone hoping to find among the generality of such thinkers hierarchized conceptions of race that are markedly less steep, or that are historically contingent and thus potentially reversible, or that are the dismissible epiphenomenon of prejudice and ignorance, are bound to be disappointed. With few exceptions, Enlightenment monologists, while declaring that all members of the genus *homo* shared common ancestors (be they an imparadised couple or immiserated troglodytes) and thus that all currently living people were members of the same species, this was an intellectual premise that did remarkably little to prevent such thinkers from imagining racial others as their moral and physical inferiors. At best, the concession of common origin was cancelled-out by the positing of a subsequent geographical dispersion that wrought seemingly irreversible damage on the vast majority of wandering mankind (i.e., those currently residing outside Western Europe). This fatal Exodus caused palpable racial disparities of physique and mind which could now be construed as the marker of either a theologically fallen condition and/or a secular Iron Age of hereditary decline.

In the main, eighteenth and early nineteenth-century monogenists subscribed to some variety of climatological degenerationism, arguing that as human groups moved out of the area of their primordial origin (usually imagined as a Caucasoid Near East), they encountered harsh or extreme climates that mandated physical and mental adaptations that transformed them away from the Caucasian ideal (see Juengel 902-4). Thus, enervating heat, scourging cold, yearly rainy and dry seasons, desert or jungle flora and fauna, all combined to alter the skin color, stature, facial structure, and reproductive fitness. At the same time, the redirection of somatic energies needed to cope with such ungentle climes also meant that that part of the mind that fitted white Europeans to the production of art, enlightened government, and instincts of civil deportment inevitably atrophied and attenuated. The melancholy result was a world in which disparate nations, though all originally (and still, at least technically) collectivities of the same species, in fact possessed skins of varying pigments that were only the most visible marker of a host of profound changes that had transmogrified them into divergent... what, exactly? - types, breeds, varieties, but certainly races - whose habits, aptitudes, and attitudes could be as easily and (for white Europeans) as flatteringly ranked by committed monogenists as they most assuredly were by their polygenist opponents.

Since the subject here is Mary Shelley, I will trace this proclivity in monogenist thought by way of Blumenbach and his translator, Lawrence. In some ways, Blumenbach pursues a brand of monogenism that seems significantly less productive of racist attitudes than many of his peers. Though a staunch climatological degenerationist who divided up the human species into five distinct races - Caucasians, Mongolians, Africans, Americans (i.e., Amerindians), and Malays - "he argued that the races faded into one another and that it was impossible to draw sharp lines between them," and maintained that "even the African race . . . could produce members that were the equal of Caucasians" (Jackson & Weidman 19-20). Indeed, though Blumenbach is "perhaps the most famous of racial typologists," his belief in the influence of climate is so strong that he asserts that racial differences are potentially

reversible though backwards-migration, and that "color in particular is so superficial that it can easily change over the course of an individual's life . . . through changes in diet or climate" (Justin Smith 256). He denigrated both those who promulgated polygenesis in order to scandalize churchmen, such as Voltaire, as well as those who purported to found such views on more scientific evidence (Justin Smith 261). And yet, in a grim historical irony, because this pioneering biometrician insisted that there were biological differences between racial groups that could be accurately measured and reliably quantified, he gave succor to much more strident racists in his own day and throughout the nineteenth century:

racial realism has been sustained, from Blumenbach to Rushton, not as a result of any deep ontological commitment on the part of scientists and other theorists to a real, essential difference between human groups. Instead, it is sustained by a practice of quantifying small differences, which are then inflated in importance by a broader culture desirous of scientific legitimation for a racial realism to which it is committed on largely independent, nontheoretical grounds. (Justin Smith 32-33)

Thus by developing a vocabulary of racial taxonomies, by freely employing existing epithets for mixed-race individuals - "mulatto," "mameluck," "terceron," "casque," "griff" (Justin Smith 262) - and by wielding his calipers to produce "quantitative data about cranial and skeletal measurements" (Justin Smith 34), even liberal monogenists like Blumenbach end up furthering cultural or folk racism, for such figures invent and then seem to throw a cloak of scientific respectability over the categories that subsequent racists - of both the lay and scientific variety - are quick to exploit (Justin Smith 37-8).

As mentioned previously, William Lawrence was the principle British promulgator of Blumenbach's particular strain of monogenism. Indeed, the physician's exasperation with polygenists is on clear display in his *Lectures*, where he testily asks of those who would speculate racial differences, "how many Adams must we admit" to make such cumbersome theories of disparate creations plausible? And yet, as the run-up to this supposedly hard question hurled at his opponents, Lawrence presents us with a steeply hierarchized portrait of supposedly observable racial differences and does so with what can only be described as self-congratulatory relish:

The differences which exist between inhabitants of the different regions of the globe, both in bodily formation and in the faculties of the mind, are so striking, that they must have attracted the notice even of superficial observers. With those forms, proportions, and colours, which we consider so beautiful in the fine figures of Greece, contrast the woolly hair, the flat nose, the thick lips, the retreating forehead and advancing jaws, and black skin of the Negro; or the broad square face, narrow oblique eyes, beardless chin, coarse straight hair, and olive colour of the Calmuck. Compare the ruddy and sanguine European with the jet-black African, the red man of America, the yellow Mongolian, or the brown South Sea Islander: the gigantic Patagonian, to the dwarfish Laplander; the highly civilized nations of Europe, so conspicuous in arts, science, literature, in all that can strengthen and adorn society, or exalt and dignify human nature, to a troop of naked, shivering, and starved New Hollanders, a horde of filthy Hottentots, or the whole of the more or less barbarous tribes that cover nearly the entire continent of Africa. Are these all bretheren? (*Lectures* 243-44)

His answer to this final question is, consistent with his monogenic theory of human origins, in fact yes, but after such (literal) alien-ation, what brotherhood? Coming at the end of such a rich feast of visual and moral hierarchies, what subsequent declaration of shared origins could contravene it? Or even be properly noticed?

Interestingly, the *Quarterly*, which wanted this progressive intellectual taken down for his materialism, also latched onto the practical implications of his racial rhetoric with alacrity:

We content ourselves with remarking that this warm friend of civil liberty and the rights of man supplies the best apology for those who would repress the benevolent attempts to raise the poor African in the scale of civilization; and that if at any time a slave-driver in the West Indies should feel some qualms of conscience for treating the blacks under his care as a herd of oxen, he would have only to imbibe Mr. Lawrence's idea respecting their being as inferior to himself in mental faculties as the mastiff is to the greyhound in swiftness and his mind would at once be set at ease on the subject (30).

No wonder, then, that the German polygenist Georg Forster wondered "whether the thought that Blacks are our brothers has ever anywhere even once meant that the raised whip of the slave driver was put away[?]" (translated in Kitson 96). Perhaps this is the reason that the mono- vs. polygenist debate has received so little attention from critics attending to *Frankenstein*, since the climatological degenerationism that is almost the universal default position of monogenist explanations of race renders the seemingly significant distinction between mono- and polygenesis into one without an attendant real-world difference. Climate rushes in to fill the space from which monogenists have banished the notion of separate creations and/or evolutions and proceeds to do the racist work just as handily as the concepts it replaced. But this tweedled-dee, tweedled-dum aspect of mono- and polygenesis in action itself becomes an issue in *Frankenstein*, which asks much the same question as Forster, and in a way that implicitly castigates Lawrence for not understanding the anti-racist attitudes that his monogenism might seem to logically entail.

Because of Lawrence's materialistic explanation of life and his insistence that *homo sapiens* be conceived as just another member of the animal kingdom (and because he added theories of random mutation and geographically isolated in-breeding to Blumenbach's climactic determinants of race), he was long seen as a harbinger of Darwin, and thus of the rigorously evidence-based mainstream of the modern scientific method. But, as Justin Smith makes clear, one crucial step toward the dark flowering of scientific racism during the remainder of the nineteenth century was a clearing away of all notions of the immortal soul and the exceptionalism within the natural order that such a conception supposedly conferred upon human beings. For as long as "the human soul and the human body were thought to be different things, essentializing racial categories could be kept at bay, but when man came to be seen as one natural thing among others, the unity of the human species was lost, and different peoples could be seen as having fundamentally different natures" (Justin Smith 17-18). Many a racist taxonomy put forward in the decades following the publication of *Frankenstein* therefore gained traction from "an increasing concern in the modern period to understand the human being as a thoroughly natural being, as exhaustively comprehensible within the terms of a system of nature that also includes primates,



quadrupeds, mollusks, and plants" (Justin Smith 266). This, as the *Quarterly* asserted, was the dark thread connecting Lawrence's materialism with his racism.

If the Tory periodical suspected that "once the biblical account of human origins is dispensed with, there is little to prevent the estrangement of different races of humanity" by purportedly scientific taxonomists (Kitson 100), it has to be admitted that Victor's secular-scientific outlook at least coexists with his insistence that the Creature is an inferior subspecies of *homo* possessing no rights that a white man need respect. Shelley's Genevan seems at pains to suggest that his signal discovery is of a hitherto unknown but entirely material property of organic matter (though for an alternative viewpoint, see Ruston 82). And, though he divulges no specifics about his method, it is clearly scientific rather than necromantic in nature, since though "some miracle might have produced it, yet the stages of the discovery were distinct and probable" (35). But if the novel thus tacitly endorses - through the absence of any countervailing material in plot or dialogue - Lawrence's materialist views, does his monogenism receive much the same treatment? The example of the polygenist abolitionist Charles White should caution us not to read even the Shelleys' well-documented hatred of slavery as automatically implying the couple's monogenist outlook in the absence of direct evidence. Yes, they marked out passages from Mungo Park and from slavers which they knew would spark their spouse's "horror and indignation" (Seymour 138), but this must always remain just shy of conclusive. When it comes to Mary, the best evidence for her monogenism is the fact that in *Frankenstein* Victor's polygenic utterances are vigorously disputed by both the Creature's rhetoric and the plot's trajectory. Here, in contrast to the case with the vitalism-materialism controversy, intellectual combat ensues within the pages of the novel. But the outcome is the opposite of a decisive win for either position. Rather, mono- and polygenism appear to fight each other to a sterile, dispiriting draw, emerging not so much as diametrical world views, but rather as - if I may - two mere types or varieties possessing a common origin in an instinctive repugnance for the racial Other, and which both conduce to more of the same. As Brantlinger asserts, the Creature "is a monster because he is not-human *and* because he is almost human" (135, Brantlinger's italics).

Much more clear-cut is Shelley's use of the Creature as a way to speculate about human origins. To begin with, Victor's creation is a composite being constructed from resurrected portions of the dead. This means that the Creature is, in his very conception, both a revivification of the human past and a single figure who, because he is made of many others, becomes (if only in an ironic and Gothic key) a representative figure, a singleton who stands in for a posited but unnamed group of others. He therefore resembles nothing so much as that primordial figure of Rousseau and his fellow stadial theorists, "Man in the State of Nature" - even before he himself is rudely thrust out into the cold by Victor's criminal neglect. In a Scriptural key, as Ian Balfour notes, "the early history of the creature constitutes a version of the origins of man or humanity, even if we are importantly only dealing, Crusoe-like, with one man or quasi-man in the strict sense," since his Adamic "adult birth links the Creature's story all the more with the originary myth of human creation in the Bible" (788). Even Victor's first horrified description of his animated handiwork evokes a Biblical-era past, since according to him "a mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch" (40). And then too, once the Creature comes to full consciousness of his own situation - and absorbs *Paradise Lost* - he perceives himself as a version of a Milton's first man: "like Adam, I was created apparently united by no link to any other being in existence" (101). Adopting a more secular lens gets us to much the same place, for we must still "understand the [C]reature as an allegorical figure for humanity as such" given "his

progress from sensation to knowledge, his negotiation of the primal needs of early humans, and the recognizable sequence of acquiring food, shelter, and clothing[,] discovering and reproducing fire[,] and first attempting language" (Balfour 788). Thus, while on one level the Creature is undoubtedly something new under the sun, the newness he radiates suggests at every moment a paradoxical primality, a time long past when our species as a whole was but newly created.

Victor's view of human origins is implicitly polygenic - and with good reason, since he actually commits an act of polygenesis, or rather one whose figurative recapitulation of primordial poly-Adamism is nearly too literal to even qualify as metaphorical. Furthermore, since his polygenic achievement constitutes the climactic scene of the novel's first volume, one might hastily assume that the novel as a whole accepts polygenesis as an historical fact, no matter whether it views that fact as something neutrally explanative or (as with materialism) as the root of endemic tragedy - though as will become clear, this is far from the case. For his part, though, Victor sticks as consistently to his polygenic viewpoint as he does to his materialistic one (unsurprising, if Shelley in fact saw them as mutually reinforcing), and time and again employs rhetoric that casts the Creature as belonging to a different species from that constituted by himself, his family, and his (pair of) friends. Thus, when anticipating the pleasures attendant upon the expected success of his experiment, he foresees that "a new species would bless [him] as its creator and source" (36). If this is his attitude before the catastrophic night of creation, it is no wonder that his rhetoric thereafter continues to paint the Creature as other and less than fully human. Upon his first subsequent sighting of the being, we are told that its "gigantic stature, and the deformity of its aspect" are "more hideous than belongs to humanity," and that he is beholding "nothing in [a] human shape" (55). From then on in we hear only of the "daemon," the "devil," the "wretch" and the "monster," with vehement regularity. Victor's unintended meeting with the Creature occurs amidst the peaks of the Alps, which the natural philosopher considers as "the habitations of another race of beings" (70).

Still, their alpine parley leads to a negotiated truce, after which Victor agrees to construct a mate for the Creature, with whom the latter vows to permanently depart for "the vast wilds of South America" (115). It is, however, on the brink of this second act of creation - with Victor admitting only that he will be creating "a thinking and reasoning animal" (132) - that his polygenic beliefs come fully to the fore. Interestingly, these take the form of an apprehension that, given the imaginative facts of Shelley's text, is entirely illogical:

Even if they were to leave Europe, and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror. Had I a right, for my own benefit, to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations? . . . to buy [my] own peace at the price, perhaps, of the existence of the whole human race? (132)

Here again, there are two species: that of the Creature and that of man, or the human race. But what is even more telling is Victor's insistence that the offspring of the Creature and his mate will inevitably look like them, rather than emerge as the perfectly normal infants (because birthed, not stitched) that simple logic demands. Victor's assumption is either some hyper-Lamarckian fever-dream or, more likely, an expression of (in 1818) an intellectually respectable polygenic outlook: the two

creatures are both members of the distinct species that Victor created and thus, to his mind, their offspring will resemble them, not him. The fact that Victor then irrevocably ruins the Creature's life, his own, and that of his loved ones by tearing up the female seems to suggest that Shelley views polygenist theories as the root of much dark mischief in the world.

Moreover, in portraying her act of separate creation not as an event foreshadowed in Scripture or ancient secular chronicles, but as a reckless intervention by an embodiment of rationalistic hubris, she implicitly critiques her own era's rising tide of pseudo-scientific, polygenic racism. But perhaps even more disturbing to her is the fact that Victor's fearful, eliminationist attitude toward his Creature's descendants could be equally justified by her friend William Lawrence's *monogenic* explanations. After all, the surgeon believed that "only [spontaneous genetic] variation and heredity could explain racial differences. Variations arose as a result of spontaneous sporting [i.e., mutation] and were then maintained through isolation and inbreeding," and he was convinced that "such a process could have produced [observed, present-day] racial diversification from the original stock or group" (Jackson and Weidman 38). Thus, according to the Lawrencean view, if the in-breeding couple agrees to banish themselves to Amazonia, then, given the inevitable sporting of hereditary mutations and the geographical isolation they intend to impose upon themselves, they are merely laying the groundwork for the coming race war - or rather, species war - that Victor already trembles to imagine.

The Creature, of course, never mentions the term "monogenesis," but it is clear in Volumes II and III, both from his own rhetoric and from the text's deployments of action and opportunity, that a case is being made for the Creature's species-identity with Victor and the other *homo sapiens* whom he encounters in the course of the plot. Consider, in brief, the Creature's accomplishments (Allan Lloyd Smith 217-18). For one thing, he is learned, not only having imbibed such authors as Plutarch, Milton, Goethe, and Volney, but having extrapolated a tragic *weltanschauung* from them that seems unavailable to his unknowing tutors, the DeLaceys. For another, he is eloquent, Victor at one point admitting that "his words had a strange effect upon [him]" (116), just as Walton is "touched by the expression of his misery" until he "call[s] to mind what Frankenstein had said of his powers of eloquence and persuasion" (178). Additionally, the Creature is a master of several literary registers, including controlled and self-conscious deployments of invective, bathetic apologia, and even sarcasm - "eat, and be refreshed" (166) he snidely tells Victor amidst their hurtle toward death. That all his resemblances to a high-functioning *homo sapien* may be construed as Shelley's implicit criticism of Lawrence's brand of race-ranking monogenism is suggested by the fact that the physician "made one all-important addition to Blumenbach's racial theory. Following Kant and Herder in Germany, Lawrence attributed specific *moral characteristics* to each racial type," and "in his view the white race has preeminence" in "moral and intellectual endowments" (Mellor 8, italics hers, Lawrence 476). If the Creature is in any way a figure for the non-Caucasian, then Victor's preeminence over him in these categories is thrown very much into doubt.

If, despite this, the Creature understands that he has acted in ways that Victor finds inhuman - which is to say, sub-human - then he retorts by putting forward a psychological theory to explain, mitigate, and thus to literally human-ize his worst crimes: "My heart was fashioned to be susceptible of love and sympathy" until it was "wrenched by misery to vice and hatred" (178). In essence, his brief is that what differentiates him from the normal run of mankind is dire experience rather than distinct

taxonomy. Among the first of many readers to be convinced by this argument was the reviewer for *Knights Quarterly Magazine* in 1823:

My interest . . . is entirely on the side of the monster. His eloquence and persuasion, of which Frankenstein complains, are so because they are truth. The justice is indisputably on his side, and his sufferings are, to me, touching in the last degree. Are there any sufferings, indeed, so severe as those which arise from the sensation of dereliction, or, (as in this case) of isolation? (198)

The Creature readily admits that he has sinned, but defends himself by evoking the Original sinner (for monogenists, at any rate), declaring to his maker, "I ought to be thy Adam" (75).

Likewise, his first request of Victor - that his confession be heard in full - invokes his status as a juridical subject rather than a taxonomic one: "But hear me. The guilty are allowed, by human laws, bloody as they may be, to speak in their own defense before they are condemned" (75-6). The Creature, recall, has at this point already committed one framing (of Justine for little William's murder) and will commit another before he is through (of Victor for the death of Clerval). The very act of framing bespeaks a juridical insider, since the framer uses the system's own (formal and informal) laws of evidence against her victim. So while yes, some of the Creature's crimes are bestial, arguing for a quasi-human predator that can just be put down, a few of them are quite sophisticated and seemingly the work of a criminal, complicating Victor's attempt to rhetorically push the Creature outside the bounds of his own species. For instance, Victor wishes to believe that "nothing in human shape could have destroyed that fair child" (55), an opinion shared by the magistrate he belatedly consults: "Who can follow an animal which can traverse the sea of ice, and inhabit caves and dens where no man would venture to intrude?" the jurist complains, wishfully adding that "the monster" has probably left his jurisdiction by now anyway. Victor, who receives no practical aid from the magistrate, is nevertheless clearly buoyed by his use of the word "animal" in reference to the Creature, gleefully speculating that therefore "he may be hunted like the chamois, and destroyed as a beast of prey" (161). It is not surprising, then, that when Victor speaks in a theological rather than a juridical vein, he declares that his creation possesses only "the mockery of a soul" (*Frankenstein* 1831 edition, 187). Throughout Volume III, Victor would very much like to believe that he is engaged in a safari, while the Creature and the text he inhabits ever more stridently insist that what is actually underway is a manhunt.

Recall that for monogenists, observable racial differences are almost always attributed to climactic degeneration. In *Frankenstein*, reminders that the Creature is inherently fitted for extreme (i.e., mostly non-European) climates arrive so frequently that they begin to sound like a monogenic explanation for his disconcerting appearance. As he tells Victor amid the Alps, "the desert mountains and dreary glaciers are [his]refuge," and "the caves of ice, which [he] only do[es] not fear, are a dwelling to [him]," adding that he has "wandered here many days" (75). Later, comparing himself with the DeLaceys, the Creature finds that he "was more agile than they and could subsist upon coarser diet," that he "bore the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to [his] frame," and that his "stature far exceeded theirs" (92). For these reasons, he "did not heed" the onset of winter, being "better fitted by [his] *conformation* for the endurance of cold than heat" (103, italics mine). It is worth pausing a moment over the word "conformation," for while in Shelley's time it could simply mean "the manner in which a thing is formed," i.e., its "structure [and] organization," it could also refer to

an "adjustment in form or character to some pattern or example" - that is to say, to a process of "adaptation" (OED). So, if the Creature's recounting of his first days implies that he has been born as a fully-developed hunter-gatherer, he seems also to have emerged from the lab as a fully-formed member of one of those races who long ago migrated away from the mild climates conducive to plough-driving Caucasians and whose bodies, according to monogenists, adapted themselves to the harsher environments they eventually stumbled into.

But this aspect of the Creature's physique also suggests that Lawrence's chastisement continues throughout novel's final chapters, for there Shelley burlesques the theory of climatological degeneration by staging a chase into ever more arduous climes. During the course of this trek Victor weakens and loses his gloss of civilized attainments while the Creature waxes stronger and rockets forward through the stages of cultural development as then understood. As Victor pursues his quarry "amidst the wilds of Tartary and Russia" and northwards into the Arctic, he complains of being "wearied" by the "toilsome march," and that "the triumph of [his] enemy increase[s] with the difficulty of [his own] labors" (165, 166). The cumulative effect of this travelogue through foreign environments amidst which only the Creature can flourish is to implicitly introduce an argument about the genesis of his un-European looks that yet keeps him within the explanatory boundaries of a monogenic theory of human racial differences, despite what Victor would like to believe. Indeed, despite what Victor wrought with his own hands.

But the battle between creator and created, of course, ends only in a frostbitten stalemate, and there are other indications in the novel that while Victor's polygenism must compete with a rival theory, this competitor enjoys neither an intellectual nor emotional triumph. Consider the cosmopolitan DeLacey (formerly cosmopolitan in action, and still so in spirit), who have welcomed the inter-ethnic (though not inter-racial) romance of Felix and Safie, and whose blind patriarch seems possessed of a definition of the human that will potentially embrace the Creature, as the latter must delight to hear articulated:

The old man paused and then continued, "If you will unreservedly confide to me the particulars of your tale, I perhaps may be of use in undeceiving them. I am blind and cannot judge of 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." (105)

And yet, this instinctive monogenist is helpless to prevent his son's equally instinctive attack on the Creature as soon as Felix gains sight of him. Apparently even the firmest abstract commitment to the unity of the human species is likely to crumble under the shock of physical differences that Caucasian eyes cannot help but behold and react against. So devastated is the Creature by this triumph of image over theory in the sensorium of his beloved cottagers that by the time of his first meeting with Victor, he seems to speak of himself in self-loathingly polygenic terms, declaring "his ever-lasting war against the species" (107), lamenting that his "form is a filthy type of [Victor's], more horrid even from the very resemblance" (101), and insisting that his creator must build a mate "of the same species" as himself (113). And yet this spasm of polygenic self-identification has been almost entirely overwritten by the time the Creature eloquently (and even-handedly) eulogizes the dead Victor and chastises the latter's impulsive devotee, Walton.

What, then, are we to make of the fact that monogenic and polygenic conceptions of the Creature's origin are in close contention and alternating ascendance throughout the text? One quite understandable, but ultimately inadequate solution is to try to split the difference, as Peter Kitson attempts to do, by declaring that the novel promotes that rarest of conjunctions, a polygenism coupled with a gentle gradient of (speciated) racial hierarchy:

[T]he Creature is constructed as not human but another species. However, in the world of the novel the relationship between species is close, allied closer to transmutationist notions of the animal world. . . . affirm[ing] an anatomy of race in which viable humanoid or anthropoid creatures could, conceivably be created through a science of hybridity . . . . The Creature represents another species of humanoid life . . . . [and thus the novel may be read] as a disquisition on the tragic impossibility of the peaceful interaction of species which closely resemble one another but whose members have clear and emphatic markers of difference. (86-7)

The trouble with such attempts to average-out the novel's competing conceptions of the Creature's proper taxonomy is that it diverts one's attention from the complaint that *Frankenstein* articulates by having both the monogenic and polygenic suggestions present simultaneously in the text: i.e., that two diametrical theories about human origins that should - depending upon which of them one adopts - make all the difference in the world, wind up making no worldly difference at all when it comes to constructing racial hierarchies. The polygenist Victor hurls epithets like demon, devil, wretch; the monogenist DeLacey's scream and beat him with a stick; the Creature fares no better whether he demonstrates his monogenic origins through his actions and capacities or despairingly mimics the polygenic diction of his creator. Shelley's novel is a spectacle of theory's impotence in the face of xenophobic reflexes.

In light of this, I wish to revisit one of the novel's most oft-quoted images, to suggest that it too can be seen to further Shelley's grievance about the inability of intellectual frameworks to influence real-world attitudes and behavior. When recounting his fall into tragic knowledge - knowledge both of mankind's martial history and his own marginal ontology - the Creature seems to yearn for a Lacanian regress into infancy:

"I cannot describe to you the agony that these reflections inflicted upon me: I tried to dispel them, but sorrow only increased with knowledge. Oh, that I had forever remained in my native wood, nor known nor felt beyond the sensations of hunger, thirst and heat!

Of what a strange nature is knowledge! It clings to the mind, when it has once seized on it, like a lichen on the rock." (92)

Were one interested in keeping a running score of the battle within the text between monogenic and polygenic gestures, this would certainly have to be marked down as a point for the former, since it can be taken as yet another indication of the Creature's full humanity - as proof that he, like a true descendant of the one true Adam, has imbibed Byron's insight that "the Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life" (*Manfred* 1.1.13). And yet the Creature's apt metaphor figures forth more than the ineradicable nature of knowledge, for it simultaneously figures knowledge as the thinnest of patinas

that alters little of substance. Lichen may add a patch of color here and there, but the size, density, and unmovable nature of the rock remains unchanged. Knowledge may be sticky, but it is also superficial, lacking any penetrative power.

It only remains to point out that Mary Shelley's attitude vis-à-vis Lawrence's monogenism mirrors (that is, both reflects and inverts) her more well-known stance toward his materialism. In both instances, she implicitly grants the truth of his intellectual position while decrying its effects, though regarding the doctor's monogenism it is precisely the lack of effects that she deplors. That is, whereas *Frankenstein* implies that Victor's discovery of the merely material basis of life is the opening of a Pandora's box overbrimming with tragic consequences for the species, it figures the Creature's persuasive assertion of his taxonomic humanity as a victory that will change nothing, for what good is the theoretic unity of all humans if all anyone can notice (and some claim to measure) is the difference displayed in foreign faces and the resulting natural repugnance this causes to Caucasian sensibilities? Monogenism may be poetically affirmed, but monogenism, like poetry, makes nothing happen. For ardent opponents of the slave trade like Mary Shelley, there must have been something exasperating in hearing her admired friend champion an anthropological schema that should theoretically be of use to the anti-slavery cause (scientific monogenism), only to find him neutering it in the next breath by means of a racist addendum (climatological degenerationism).

One wonders - did she ever suspect that the notion of climate-induced morphological change was Lawrence's main argument all along, and that his monogenism was nothing more than an intellectual fig-leaf, a liberal reading of the primordial past that conveniently left current racial assumptions entirely undisturbed? Intriguingly, her celebrated parents provided her with conflicting prompts in this regard. In *The Analytic Review* of December 1788, Mary Wollstonecraft reviewed *An Essay on the Causes of Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species* (1787) by Samuel Stanhope Smith, a man whose ardent monogenism was only matched by his enthusiasm for the notion of climatological degenerationism - in other words, the precise mélange of speculations put forward by Lawrence. Wollstonecraft bestowed "particularly lavish praise" on this volume (Juengel 899-900), calling it "a masterly and philosophic answer to Lord K[ames]'s discourse on the original diversity of mankind" and remarking on "the pleasure [its] perusal has afforded us" in "making *visible* the wisdom of the Supreme Being" (431, 439). On the other hand, William Godwin, in *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), seems to call into question both the data and the motives those who credit differing climates with producing different national characteristics: "If on the contrary climate were principally concerned in forming the characters of nations, we might expect to find heat and cold producing an extraordinary effect upon men, as they do upon plants and inferior animals. But the reverse of this appears to be the fact." He then goes on to cite a number of examples that embarrass the assertions of climatological determinists, expressing doubt that such "physical causes" can by themselves account for human diversity (62-3). But, even if *Frankenstein* appears to lean toward Godwin's position, its author's skepticism about the explanatory power of climate is merely part of a larger frustration with how monogenism shuts out racial hierarchies at one door only to smuggle them into the house by other means, for while her novel is suffused with the diction of enslavement and with incidents that recall the imagery and plot-points of popular narratives about slavery (Mulvey-Roberts 63-7), within its pages neither of the two supposedly antithetical anthropological theories end up liberating anyone. As Patrick Brantlinger asserts, "the famous Wedgwood medallion, showing a black slave in chains, on his

knees, and pleading 'Am I not a man and a brother?' is precisely the dilemma the monster finds himself in" (137). But what Shelley's novel seems to irritably suggest is that even those whose vision of human origins leads them to answer yes to the first clause of this figure's urgent question still balk at affirming the second.



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