



'The pleasure of intelligence and the price of invention': An Exploration of the Problematic Pursuit of Knowledge and its Relationship with Socialisation in Samuel Johnson's *The History of Rasselas, The Prince of Abissinia* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.¹

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Samuel Johnson's *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*, a timeless moral tale, 'rests upon the notion of the insatiability of the human mind.'² Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, likewise, though ambiguously, critiques 'the Romantic genius', for relinquishing domestic relationships in favour of pursuing egotistical energies.³ In the midst of the Industrial Revolution, Shelley's 'Monster making [...] plays out, in Gothic exaggeration, the fear [of] the new science and its technological products.'⁴ Both authors condemn man's voracious yearning for more, specifically within, or rather, trying to exceed, the bounds of knowledge. The pursuit of metaphysical desires motivates almost all of Johnson and Shelley's characters within both novels, with sociability emerging as an inherent construct necessary to achieve the individuals' desired happiness and success. The removal of human companionship, which is increasingly driven away in pursuit of knowledge, is proven to have calamitous effects, particularly in search of narcissistic gratification. Both authors utilise predominantly characterisation to depict these pitfalls, didactically warning, as Gómez asserts: 'knowledge has the potential for community, mutuality and connectivity, but also the potential to make us strangers to ourselves and to each other.'⁵ Therefore, sociability and integrity must remain at the forefront of each endeavour.

Victor Frankenstein emerges as an implicit condemnation of both the rapid technological progresses and the polymathic Romantics of the nineteenth century, regarding mandatory respect for humanization. From childhood two chief tribulations of the megalomaniac's desire to learn 'the secrets of heaven and earth' materialise.⁶ Firstly, the scholar outlines his pursuit as principally, and problematically, insular; unsupervised, he recalls being 'left to struggle with a child's blindness, added to a student's thirst for knowledge' (p.40). A Lockean *tabula rasa*, Frankenstein's scholastic ambitions are initially malleable, but upon encountering the pre-Enlightenment work of Cornelius Agrippa, spurned by a 'fatal impulse', he is led to ruin (p.32). Poovey sees Shelley's antisocial dimension as her most

¹ Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), ch.8.

² Fred Parker, 'The scepticism of Johnson's *Rasselas*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, ed. by Greg Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.128.

³ Mark Hansen, "'Not Thus, after All, Would Life Be Given": Technesis, Technology and the Parody of Romantic Poetics in 'Frankenstein'", *Studies in Romanticism*, (1997), 575-609 (p.580).

⁴ Martin Tropp, *Images of fear: how horror stories helped shape Modern Culture (1818-1918)* (McFarland, 1990), p.34.

⁵ Claudia Rozas Gómez, 'Strangers and orphans: Knowledge and mutuality in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*', *Educational philosophy and theory*, 45:4 (2013), 360-370 (p.361).

⁶ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, Or, The Modern Prometheus* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1993), p.30.

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potent critique of 'the indulged imagination.'⁷ Yet Victor's educational gluttony proves equally troublesome, as he reflects: 'in scientific pursuit there is continual food for discovery and wonder' (p.40). Indicating the insatiability of knowledge; private intellectual desire is outlined as dangerous, rather than admirable.

Although clearly gifted, Victor lacks the key ingredient for success: socialisation. For Gómez, pursuing knowledge to singularly benefit the self, 'devoid of critical dialogue and engagement with others', portends inevitable destruction.⁸ Leaving home, cutting his immediate domestic ties, Frankenstein isolates himself in study, consumed singularly by scientism, having 'lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit' (43). Intent on creating life, Victor's aspiration is comparable to 'the radical desire that energized some of the best known English Romantic poems, the desire to elevate human beings into living gods.'⁹ Yet the Modern Prometheus 'finds nothing admirable in what should be a remarkable creation', which Rauch attributes to the omission of 'the humane qualities that clearly make knowledge effective, particularly nurturing and caring.'¹⁰ Considered Shelley's most overtly feminist criticism, the missing ingredient from the creation is the previously biological necessity of a mother. Creations consequently, even born from the highest degree of intellect, are outlined as accursed, should the invention be void of human relations.

Further, instead of creating something to benefit society, as is the assumed moralistic mandate of scientific discovery, Frankenstein instead fulfils his egotistically rooted longings, to have 'many happy and excellent natures [...] owe their being to [him]' (p.43). Only upon destroying the creature's female companion does he finally comprehend the wider impact on civilisation, reflecting upon 'the beings of [his] own species [...] because they included a greater proportion of happiness or misery' (p.165). This illustration simultaneously envelops the voracious nature of Victor's pursuit. Destroying the product of 'a filthy process' (p.126), the inventor resolves 'that to create another like the fiend [he] had first made would be an act of the basest and most atrocious selfishness' (p.131). A closer reading, though, reveals extreme irony in Frankenstein's resolution; as he is simultaneously 'employed in cleaning and arranging [his] chemical apparatus', items he apparently will never use again (p.130). Rauch sees this instance as 'a moment of honesty in an otherwise entirely fabricated narrative', implicitly enforcing the toxic, inescapability of education.¹¹

The pursuit of knowledge, for Shelley, takes on a very sinister guise. Like Goethe's Faust, Frankenstein, as Mellor explains, 'has sold his soul to gain forbidden knowledge', and in 'attempt to override evolutionary development and to create a new species sui generis', 'becomes a parodic perpetrator of the unorthodox creationist theory.'¹² While spared from the underworld, Victor is nevertheless punished for his egocentric misuse of knowledge, particularly for discounting societal needs. Although his creation is liberated, the creator remains confined; bound by an eternal secret, and with this, a private duty to destroy it. Attempting to extinguish the creature, Frankenstein himself programmes into a kind of

⁷ Mary Poovey, "My Hideous Progeny: Mary Shelley and the Feminization of Romanticism", *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 95, (1980), 332-47 (p.334).

⁸ Gómez, p.365.

⁹ Anne Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp.70-71.

¹⁰ Alan Rauch, 'The Monstrous Body of Knowledge in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*', *Studies in Romanticism*, (1995), 227-253 (p.228).

¹¹ Rauch, p.233.

¹² Mellor, p.101.

technology, referencing a 'vengeance that burned within [him] [...] as the *mechanical* impulse of some power of which [he] was unconscious' (my emphasis) (p.156). Having personified the very 'alien machinism' he created, and loathes, Shelley forewarns the pressing technological risks present in contemporary society, which are not only capable of exceeding man, but eventually- with an omission of sociability- destroying him.¹³

To compliment this, an epistolary narrative is utilised, with the young explorer, Walton, relaying the tragic scientist's story. Similarly embarking on a quest of discovery, Walton emphatically doubles the young Frankenstein. Divergently wishing to surpass the geographical rather than the metaphysical, Walton also partakes in a notably collective enterprise, and, writing letters to his sister, maintains connection with the domestic world. Thus, Walton is able to act on the more demanding human concerns of his expedition- namely saving his crew- and so aborts, Victor having warned him in the novel's opening and closing. Frankenstein's admonitions can be taken as 'an apt moral' for the reader too (p.24), as he pleads: '[I]earn from me [...] how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow' (p.42). Tropp sees *Frankenstein's* ending as typically Gothic, 'with the representative of a new generation witnessing the destruction of the old.'¹⁴ Yet Walton's clear ambivalence towards his withdrawal is simultaneously indicative 'that others will be sure to continue down that path', referencing the ambiguous revolutionised future, and the persistently striving Romantic attitude.¹⁵

Johnson likewise portrays characters deeply affected by their misplaced sociability, favouring instead, isolated, knowledgeable pursuit. In this regard, numerous characters in *Rasselas* align with traits of Victor, though proving less tragic, and with reversible flaws. Imlac, similarly consumed by intellectual aspiration, begins 'drinking at the fountain of knowledge, to quench the thirst of curiosity' and, much like Walton, 'began silently to despise riches', preferring the admiration achieved through knowledgeable conquest (ch.8). However, like both of Shelley's aforementioned characters, Imlac is thwarted by his pursuits and, returning home, disgusted by his education, finds his father dead with his former companions struggling to remember him. Thus, his imagined fame is disenchanting. Johnson consequently chastises the consumption of knowledge for glory, yet Imlac, unlike Victor, realises this in time to save himself, retiring to the Happy Valley. Tomarken sees Imlac as 'reminiscent of the eighteenth-century *beatus vir*, the man who turned to the natural garden in order to understand the Lucretian order of things', retreating for contemplation, but also from sheer disappointment, having failed to progress as an esteemed intellectual.¹⁶ Further, Tomarken contends 'Johnson modifies the *beatus vir* convention to make Imlac's tale within a tale serve as an illustration of learning that involves the thwarting of hopes and expectations.'¹⁷ So Imlac's somewhat dejected history becomes a warning for not only *Rasselas*, but the reader too: to not place knowledge as an exceptional means in which to achieve happiness.

Considering the more extreme characters who reject socialisation, the hermit and the astronomer equivalently pose as hyperbolic critiques of isolation. The hermit, like Imlac, withdraws from the offensiveness of society, admitting he was 'impelled by resentment than led by devotion into solitude' (ch.21). Renowned for his wisdom, the recluse, like Victor, hoards his knowledge, rather than constructively educating mankind on their misconduct, which instigated his seclusion. Meeting *Rasselas* and his companions, and more significantly witnessing 'the important sociability of the travellers',¹⁸ the hermit denounces his lifestyle

¹³ Hansen, p.608

¹⁴ Tropp, p.42

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Edward Tomarken, *Johnson, Rasselas, and the Choice of Criticism* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), p.55.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Parker, p.141.

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choice, confessing: '[t]he life of a solitary man will be certainly miserable, but not certainly devout' (ch.21). Resolving to return to the very city which he so vehemently fled from, the hermit 'gazed with rapture' upon Cairo; in awe at the prospect of reuniting with civilisation, and decisively shedding his insincere status of a devout intellectual (ch.21).

The concluding individual introduced in *Rasselas* is the astronomer. Driven insane by his own seclusion, the genius believes he has the 'great office' of controlling the weather, and, although appearing happy upon introduction, repents his sequestered lifestyle (ch.42). When questioned by the prince on the choice of life, the astronomer finds himself unable to offer instruction, having mistakenly 'passed [his] time in study without experience – in the attainment of sciences which can for the most part be but remotely useful to mankind' (ch.46). So, he, like Victor, has squandered domestic relations; and in doing so blasted his chances of happiness. Thus, both academics choose to pursue knowledge- unserviceable to society- at a very high price. For both the hermit and the astronomer, it is not until achieving their fortunate, microcosmic sociability, in the form of *Rasselas*' entourage, that they can comprehend their flawed lifestyles.

Davis notes the 'strong, personally embodied attitude to life', present across Johnson's works.¹⁹ An academic himself, though obsessed with maintaining socialisation, Johnson notoriously dreaded his own academic inadequacy. Consumed in aspiring to disproportionate overachievement, the author was recorded questioning his accomplishments in conversation with Hannah More: 'How can I tell when I have done *enough*?'.²⁰ So, like his own characters, Johnson censures not only sequestration- notoriously fearing insanity- but also the desire to learn beyond achievable bounds, personally experiencing that it is not conducive to contentment.

In the conclusion, where famously, and frustratingly, 'nothing is concluded' (ch.49), Tomarken notes '[t]he only resolution is a negative one: isolation [...] is a mistake because it prevents the self-correction possible in the society of the world at large.'²¹ So, for Victor and Walton, and Imlac, the hermit and the astronomer, the search for knowledge can often disastrously prompt a separation from society, and eventually, the self. Yet, unlike Shelley's tragic protagonist, Johnson's characters prove capable of re-joining society; so, the conclusion is not so adverse as Tomarken claims. Ultimately, both authors evidently necessitate sociability and a controlled, moralistic pursuit of knowledge, crucially renouncing egotistical motives.

As aforementioned, the reclusive Victor is incapable of creating something valuable to society, and as Rauch explains, consequently creates something as repulsive to civilisation, as socialisation is to the scientist.²² The subsequent creature, or rather, 'body of knowledge', is inevitably problematic, as 'good' or 'bad' knowledge, unexplained, will have a 'monstrous quality' and to remove such requires 'de-monstration'; communicating the unknown in order to avoid the preordained epistemological dilemma.²³ Yet, rejected by his own creator, there is no hope for the creature to be understood and so, conjointly, accepted and socialised.

¹⁹ Philip Davis, 'Extraordinarily Ordinary: the life of Samuel Johnson,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, ed. by Greg Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.8.

²⁰ William Roberts, *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs Hannah More*, 2nd edn. (London, 1834), p.376.

²¹ Tomarken, p.101.

²² Rauch, p.236-237.

²³ *Ibid*.

Critics repeatedly see the creature as 'a striking image through which to visualize fears engendered by the Industrial Revolution', Shelley having 'created a model for popular fears of the factory system in her horror story of man and Monster [...] in concert with what the Romantic poets around her were writing on the subject.'²⁴ The creature's accidental gigantic stature is considered a reflection of the first enormous steam engines populating the English landscape- the 'dark satanic mills' in Blake's *Jerusalem* (1808). Wordsworth was also troubled by the effects of industrialization, initially articulating approval in his Preface to the Second Edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), but by 1814 overtly denouncing the vices of the Industrial Revolution, specifically in the eighth and ninth books of his epic poem *The Excursion*. These unexplained technological advancements caused significant anxiety throughout the early nineteenth century, so Victor's enigmatic creature was likewise, contemporarily, a terrifying fusion of man and machinery. Ironically though, disparate from his master, the creature longs to be understood and socialised by the very civilisations that fear him; desperately seeking companionship and basing his entire pursuit of knowledge upon thus.

The creature voyeuristically obsesses over the DeLacey family, anxious to join their affectionate homestead. Recognising he must first learn to communicate with them, the creature treats language, the 'godlike science', as an all-consuming discipline, a lifeline for socialisation (p.86). Before attempting to reach out, though, the creature learns of his own 'miserable deformity' (p.88), seeing for the first time his reflection in 'a transparent pool' (p.89). This revelation powerfully teaches the creature that literacy, or any education, will never win him acceptance into society, but rather, knowledge 'only discovered to [him] more clearly what a wretched outcast [he] was' (p.101). Increasingly estranged with increased education, I disagree with Gómez that '[t]he more the Creature learns, the more connected he feels to others.'²⁵ Rather, I approve Small's view, that the more the creature learns, the more alienated he becomes from his objective; as before any education, he is rather 'in the happy state of pre-lapsarian Adam.'²⁶ Having not yet eaten the knowledgeable fruit, the creature remains hopeful of being accepted, and, upon devouring this poisonous understanding, learns of his eternal seclusion.

Unsupervised in his studies, like Frankenstein, the creature misinterprets his conveniently discovered books, treating them as 'histories' (p.98). Relating himself to Adam, then Satan in *Paradise Lost*, the creature tries to identify with other beings, supporting Storey's assertion that 'even as it makes us aware of ourselves, reading tends strongly to delude us about ourselves, as Rousseau experiences.'²⁷ Contemplating the education of the creature without equivalently drawing on Rousseau would be difficult. While disordered prior to his education, the creature, like Rousseau's 'natural man' can satisfy his primal desires: feeling 'pleasure' at the sight of the moon, 'delight' in the warmth of a fire, and 'wonder' at the rising sun (pp.80-81). Whereas, upon associating with society- though disastrously as an outsider- the more desolate the creature becomes, impelled by misreading and rejection.

Society, as Rousseau explained, provides the individual with self-consciousness, which, once gained, cannot be discarded.²⁸ The creature's consciousness significantly being his own individuality, as 'a blot upon the earth', a man-made artefact of techno-science (93). Subsequently wishing 'to shake off all thought and feeling', the creature discovers that 'knowledge', or more precisely, self-consciousness, 'clings to the mind, when it has once

²⁴ Tropp, p.36

²⁵ Gómez, p.365.

²⁶ Christopher Small, *Ariel like a Harpy: Shelley, Mary and Frankenstein* (London: Gollancz, 1972), p.63.

²⁷ Benjamin Storey, 'Self-Knowledge and Sociability in the Thought of Rousseau', *Perspectives on Political Science*, 41:3 (2012), 146-54 (p.147).

²⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, translated by Mallory Conyngham (Virginia: Blacksburg, 2001).

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seized on it, like a lichen on the rock' (p.93). We may consequently question would the creature be happier illiterate and oblivious to his own isolation? Indeed, McWhir posits the creature as 'a literate Caliban', 'deformed by his social and literary experience', 'given no Rosseau to read [...] he comes to believe in the anti-Rosseau position that man is weak *without* society.'²⁹

Facing solitude, and vengeful on mankind after recurring rejection, the creature not only despises knowledge, but crucially, wishes to change what constitutes as such. While needing the agent, Frankenstein, to justify his product, the creature instead has to teach himself and others of his conception, without opportunity to do so, as civilisations drive him away upon first appraisal. Snapping his final link to society by refusing to make the creature a mate, Frankenstein's creation ultimately becomes a monster; 'embark[ing] on its systematic destruction of domestic harmony', which he resentfully cannot ever obtain.³⁰

Similarly, Rasselas, although confined within a 'prison of pleasure' (ch.47), longs to be immersed within civilisation. Like the creature he desires knowledge and socialisation, albeit to different means. Smith sees Rasselas' departure from the Happy Valley in accordance with 'the Platonic mode of repetition [...] "grounded in a solid archetypal model."³¹ The plot 'imitates the Christian archetype of man's origins': falling from innocence within paradise, searching for lost innocence in the outer world, and- presumably- returning to paradise at the end of the novel.³² Like Adam and Eve, Rasselas proves dissatisfied with the luxuries afforded within his own Edenic kingdom. The prince craving 'something to pursue' (ch.3), chases knowledge 'impatient as an eagle in a grate' (ch.5), though also seemingly comes to regret his search.

The novel occupies a deeply repetitive narrative structure. Rasselas comically interchanges between hope, disappointment, and then revamped optimism, cyclically; until finally giving up on his impossible endeavour. Believing knowledge can provide him the answer to eternal happiness, which 'must be something solid and permanent, without fear and without uncertainty', Rasselas pursues the unachievable, and like Frankenstein's creature, equivalently fails (ch.17). Progressing on his philosophical journey, the prince becomes increasingly knowledgeable and decreasingly optimistic. Disgusted at the two-dimensional characters he meets- the young hedonists, the counterfeit philosopher and the isolated, miserable, scholars- Rasselas regrettably turns from his own ideals that led him from unenlightened seclusion. Having found society to be, as Imlac warned, 'a sea foaming with tempests and boiling with whirlpools', teeming with 'waves of violence' and 'rocks of treachery' (ch.12).

Although the creature's acquired social experience turns him into the very fiend his appearance would recommend, Rasselas is merely disappointed. This is due to his maintenance of domestic relationships, which, as aforementioned, the creature cannot obtain. Notably, in the conclusion as the prince, Nekayah and Pekuah voice their ideal choices of life, 'all three of the fantasies that they now exchange concern communities.'³³ So, although disenchanting, they significantly learn the essentiality of socialisation, and appreciate such. It seems Rasselas has acted on Imlac's earlier advice: 'while you are making the choice of life you neglect to live' (ch.30). In becoming consumed by the pursuit of knowledge, and forgetting

²⁹ Anne McWhir, 'Teaching the Monster to Read: Mary Shelley, Education and Frankenstein', *The educational legacy of Romanticism* (1990) 73-92 (p.75-76).

³⁰ Poovey, p.337.

³¹ Duane Smith, 'Repetitive Patterns in Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 36:3, (1996), 623-639 (p.627).

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Parker, p.140.

to enjoy life's existing pleasures, this guidance can be taken universally. Understanding the conditions of his writing *Rasselas*, Johnson's censure becomes increasingly poignant; composing the novel in just one week to raise money for his mother's funeral. Thus, the message is clear: to enjoy and appreciate existing pleasures, and not squander such in pursuit of the elusive 'beyond.'

In conclusion, for all of the characters explored, knowledge proves not only anticlimactic, but baser still; breeding insolence and hubris for Victor and Johnson's scholars, and at best, promising everything yet pilfering optimism, as for *Rasselas*' entourage and the creature. Socialisation, which is either rejected or ardently sought, proves inseparable from knowledge. The omission of such generating failure in the individual's intellectual endeavours, or the search for it revealing the cruelties of humanisation. The astrologer's reflection that 'knowledge without integrity is dangerous and dreadful' (ch.41), is proven through the scholars' disregard for wider society, and their ensuing misery- which Shelley seemingly sees as a fitting punishment for her egotistical Romantic peers. Equivalently, the creature and *Rasselas* likewise fail in pursuit of unmanageable schemes, as from birth both are quarantined from socialisation; the prince in the limited society of his siblings and attendants, the creature completely alone. Thus, ignorant to domestic reality, both aspire to unachievable ambitions. In overcoming these assorted failures, both Shelley and Johnson implicitly advocate moralistic ambitions and a strong regard for, and upholding of, humanistic relationships.

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