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Mishaps of Discovery: Research & Destroy

One aspect of Mary Shelley's tale of the Modern Prometheus is its exhibition of destructive and self-destructive pattern of territorial exploration and colonialism as practiced by European nations. The exhibition of mishaps and mistakes, deliberate or accidental, of exploration, colonization, and oppression, and of their consequences pigmented into the fabric of the conflict between the Creature and the human society that he involuntarily finds himself in. The conflict arises from the Creature's looks and human beings' intolerance, in fact absolute rejection of, his physical features. This discord of what is acceptable and what is deplorable by the societies of Europe brings both the discoverer and the discovered to their ruins. Deficiencies in the scientist's, Victor Frankenstein's, attitude and methods, during and after the discovery, are responsible for the emergence and maintenance of one of the poles of the conflict: the existence of a monster. Thus, these deficiencies are planted high and obvious before another explorer's, Robert Walton's eyes as lessons and warnings.

It is critical to note that Mary Shelly specifically chooses a self-educated geographic explorer, of all other branches of science and exploration, as the relater of her tale: Robert Walton, as the first-person narrator, becomes our news-bearer (sender), archiving the warnings of a damned experiment as he "continue[s] [his] journal concerning the stranger" (60). The stranger, still not coincidentally, is Victor Frankenstein, a scientist whose attention is peculiarly attracted to "the structure of the human frame..."(79). Thus, the tale introduces us, after the imbedded narrator, a

narrator that brings in the element of humanity, with its life and death phenomena, and adjoins it to the element of geography.

Walton is on an expedition to “sate [his] ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited” (50) and fancies to find “a land surpassing in wonder and in beauty every region hitherto discovered on the habitable globe” (49). This enthusiasm of Walton is matched by the zeal of Victor in giving life to a form he put together for “a new species would bless [him] as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to [him]” (83). These two passions and their enterprises in the path of glory are familiar themes to us from the tales of early European explorers on their quests to discover new worlds and bring civilization of their humanity and the divinity of their gods to these parts of the world, as well as bringing back gold and glory.

Walton chooses the North Pole as the general location of his expedition because “it ever presents itself to [his] imagination as the region of beauty and delight” (49) and, also probably because most other parts of the world have already been discovered. The beneficial results of these discoveries, however, are debatable in Shelley’s view. So she calls upon a disastrously experienced scientist to signal Walton about the virtues of prudence and of the comprehensive consideration of nature’s ways.

Walton is a naïve romantic adventurer and in need of a friend or a guide for he is self-educated and prone to make missteps. It is to his credit that he recognizes his vulnerable qualities and seeks a guide. “How would such a friend repair the faults of your poor brother! I am too ardent in execution, and too impatient of difficulties. But

it is a still greater evil to me that I am self-educated..."(53), he admits. It is interesting, moreover, when we think of the Creature's strife to educate himself, that he considers self-education as "evil" to him. Considering the vast amounts of information sets, in different disciplines and all interrelated to each other, to be learned in order to understand and function adequately in a society such as the Western civilization, it makes sense that one should have a complete education from the members of one's society or stratum to avoid the fate of the scientist who failed to prepare a comprehensive environmental impact assessment for his enterprises.

Walton's wish is granted. There appears, soon after the extraordinary figure of the Creature in the distance, Victor; all miserable and desperately in need of care yet still hesitating to get on board the ship until confirming that the ship is north bound. Victor and his crew are "on a voyage of discovery towards the northern pole" (59). And thus begins an episode of education from a master to navigate the tale aright.

On the vessel, Victor tells Walton, who "...seek for knowledge and wisdom..."(62), of his misfortunes, hoping that "...the gratification of [Walton's] wishes may not be a serpent to sting [him]..." and "that the strange incidents connected with [Victor's tale] will afford a view of nature, which may enlarge [Walton's] faculties and understanding" (62). Accordingly, we hear how a hideous monster had been brought to life.

When evaluated by the aspect that is mentioned above, the exhibition of destructive and self-destructive pattern of territorial exploration and colonialism, the Creature represents the indigenous population of discovered (occupied) territories. By the time of Shelley, there were innumerable monstrosities around the world,

incomparably more brutal and greater than the wickedness of the Monster, inflicted by human beings on other human beings within the context and under the pretext of exploration and bringing civilization (colonization) to the new territories.

Understandably, Shelley was current with this chapter of the world's history, for Victor reflects that "if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquility of his domestic affections... America would have been discovered more gradually; and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed" (84).

Europe found the savages of newly discovered geographies somewhat deformed, ugly, inadequate in fashion, and in need of improvement by all means or, if hopeless or resistant to the improvement, in need of destruction. The Creature, too, is brought about and immediately afterward detested and rejected by the people of Europe, including his own discoverer, the father. "Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room" (85), admits Victor.

Purportedly, Victor has created a living being from the parts of already dead and living. "...I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave, or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay" (82), he reports. That may be so but even if he had not done anything with those parts, they would have turned themselves into some other forms of beings anyhow. Victor, then, created only one of the possibilities of being for those parts and declared himself as the creator, forgetting all the other possibilities of existence for them before he altered their courses. This corresponds to the stories of conquistadors and their newly "discovered" subjects, whose lives were radically and perpetually altered afterward and the societies of Europe find no

compassion in their hearts to accept them as they were, even if these subjects openheartedly offered their services and even love, in certain cases, for them.

Victor intervenes the space between life and death and, in a "...workshop of filthy creation..."(82) and after a most gruesome process, introduces a new creature, a "...being of a gigantic stature..." (81), a "...miserable monster..."(86) to the world. The Creature is a savage, a primitive wretch, and hideous at that. "Oh! no mortal could support the horror of that countenance" (86) remembers his own creator. Although desperately lacking adequacy in all standard faculties and features of Western Europe, the Creature is abandoned to himself in the middle of Europe and eyes were closed hoping that it would vanish by a miracle.

From then on, the Creature, strayed into the wilderness by now, is identified as an enemy and Victor is happy with his enemy's disappearance. "I clapped my hands for joy..." (89), he acknowledges. This psychological/ideological mechanism, the denial of a phenomenon's existence, plays its important role to this day in the politics/conflicts of sovereignty and colonization. Until recently Australian officials denied the existence of Aborigines as a different ethnic group. The government of Turkey still denies that Kurds are of a different nation. It is needless to refer to the cases of American Indians in both South and North America since the 15th century.

This act, forsaking what is brought to the sight of human beings, may be called merely an example of irresponsibility or an overreaction at the sight of a horrific being. Yet another interpretation could be that someone "...who aspire[d] to become greater than his nature will allow" (81) over ambitiously "...pursued nature to her hiding places" (82), uncovered a being beneath its blanket with the compulsions of

glory and opening a new era in the history of humanity but detested to death what welcomed him innocently or ignorantly, finding the result quite distasteful to compared to his expectations.

This disappointment becomes a secret dirty war between the Uncovered and Victor. The European society takes her place on Victor's front, of course, whenever the war spills out of the narrow field that lies between the enlightened explorer and the "...depraved wretch..." (103). Such a plot brings the initial conflict to a platform where antagonism is repeatedly underlined, making one character, the European society, the side that refuses to co-exist, "There can be no community between you and me; we are enemies" (126), as Victor puts it, and with both sides challenging each other in desperation of life and death. Upon the mortal-combat move of Victor, the Creature responds, "Life, although it may only be an accumulation of anguish, is dear to me, and I will defend it" (126). Moreover, the element of art of political negotiation is not omitted here. The Creature offers truce, compromising to be "...mild and docile to [his] natural lord and king..." (126), should his lord "...perform [his] part, the which [the lord] owest [his creature]" (126). Occasional cease-fires, sessions of negotiation, and periods of agreements are recurrent throughout the history of conflicts between the colonial powers and rebel forces, who are usually eagerly ready to integrate into the larger system of imperialism with the conditions of being recognized and relatively sovereign.

Such an agreement and subsequent integration, however, is not possible if the properties (qualities and features) of the weaker one are absolutely rejected by not only the current conscious of the society but also by its subconscious and by its

collective unconscious altogether. It is significant that everyone, regardless of age and level of worldly knowledge, is petrified by the Creature and either runs away from him or attacks him. Like the old man in the hut, who, after noticing him, "...shrieked loudly, and, quitting the hut, ran across the fields with a speed of which his debilitated form hardly appeared capable" (132). His experience in the little village nearby that hut is even more instructive. As the Creature recalls his entrance to one of the cottages in the village, "...I had hardly placed my foot within the door, before the children shrieked, and one of the women fainted. The whole village was roused; some fled, some attacked me..." (132). Even Ernest, whom the Creature had thought "...was unprejudiced, and had lived too short a time to have imbibed a horror of deformity" (166) revealed the same reaction. Europeans' utter rejection of the original inhabitants of the newly discovered lands yielded complete genocides in many parts of the world. Consequently, although ultimately they may seem victorious, Europeans suffered greatly as well from their frenzied gesticulations of discoveries, explorations, and invasions. All of these have been done without sound and through consideration as to their impact onto these new environments besides the impacts on their own environments, which have inevitably went through violent transformations as well with industrialization that obtained a pace at stupefying rapidity following the discoveries of regions where vast raw-materials and cheap labor were extracted from.

Have we since made an accurate evaluation of what is lost with the destruction and utter elimination of pre-colonial civilizations of Americas, Africa and Australia with their own richness and depth in all aspects? Walton excitedly writes to his

sister, “I am going to unexplored regions...but I shall kill no albatross, therefore do not be alarmed for my safety” (55). I think with an alarmed conscious that Mary Shelley brings on board a scientist, who is ruined subsequently to his own fatally flawed discoveries, to warn Walton, taking great pains in telling his story. There are innumerable ways of killing an albatross, especially with the irresponsible and immature uses of technology.

Although Victor does not find the justification to wholly discourage Walton from the course of discovery, he entreats him to learn from him, “...if not by [his] precepts, at least by [his] example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge...” (81).