ENGL 251. Experiments in the Novel: The Eighteenth Century
Professor Jill Campbell

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. — Xavier Blackwell-Lipkind

Spivak, Austin, and the Verbalization of Self-Immolation in Frankenstein

by Xavier Blackwell-Lipkind '24

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* ends with the creature's promise to "consume to ashes this miserable frame," exulting "triumphantly … in the agony of the torturing flames" (220-221). But the act of self-immolation itself, if it is ever carried out, occurs beyond the boundaries of the text; it is relegated to, or hidden behind, some "mad dream of the Arctic" (Oates 543) to which the reader only has access via the creature's words. Out of this lattice of words and deeds emerges a deceptively simple question: what does the creature accomplish — what does he *do* — by sharing his suicidal intentions? And, more specifically, why does the creature promise to set himself on fire? Deploying Gayatri Spivak's analysis of sati (widow suicide) in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and J. L. Austin's philosophy of speech acts in *How to Do Things with Words,* I examine the extent to which the creature manages to free himself from the prescriptive weight of Walton's pen. I resist an interpretation of the final oration as an escape or a reclaiming of agency, suggesting instead that the creature's deployment of speech-acts is ultimately insufficient to "burn" through the rigid layers of the text.

Before it is possible to discuss what the creature's promise *does,* one must establish what it *is.* The creature plans to light himself on fire and thus to "die" (220). He locates pleasure, or at least non-pain, in this anticipated death; the first prediction he makes after invoking his end is that "I shall no longer feel the agonies which now consume me, or be the prey of feelings unsatisfied, yet unquenched" (220). Loss of life becomes synonymous with the disappearance of physical and mental suffering; it represents an escape from predatorial ("prey") and insatiable ("unquenched") emotion. The creature acknowledges that to be dead

is to *lack* — "the sun or stars, … the winds … light, feeling, sense" — but he is convinced that he has no other option, that "in this condition *must* I find my happiness" (220, emphasis mine). Death is, in short, a "consolation," an opportunity to "rest" (220). The language chosen by the creature is intriguing in its constant negotiation of proximity and distance. On the one hand, the creature's syntax seems designed to obscure or displace the "I," to distance the reader from its immediacy: "what I now feel [shall] be no longer felt," he exclaims "with sad and solemn enthusiasm" (221), ending on a hanging participle and leaving us to infer that these feelings will no longer be felt *by him*. On the other hand, his repetition of the phrase "I shall die" (220, 221) indicates an effort to reconcile the notion of a self with the concept of death; the creature makes a performance of his prediction, centering the "I" on the literary stage and bringing us closer to his experience of interiority. The final pages of the book thus enact a tension between intimacy and remoteness. This dialectic is rendered physical, even meteorological, by the creature's plan to build a fire in "the most northern [remote] extremity of the globe" (220), an image that forces warmth up against coldness.

Given this alternate centering and decentering of the "I," we might ask whether it is accurate to use the word "suicide" to describe the creature's demise — which, after all, Shelley defines only in terms of *death.* Spivak presents several cases in which ending one's life goes beyond, or contravenes, "a killing of the self," noting in particular that if a "knowing subject comprehends the insubstantiality or mere phenomenality … the 'that'-ness of its identity" (68), talk of "suicide" is senseless, for the killing of *that* comes to stand in for the killing of *this.* To the extent that the creature perceives himself as a "that" — a "wretch," an "instrument," a "frame," a being for whom death is merely the completion of "work" (220) — it seems plausible that his (anticipated) death, instead of constituting a reflexive act, becomes a sort of transfer, a killing of one being by another, of "that" by "this." In that sense, the creature is promising not *self*-immolation, but rather immolation. Indeed, the description

of the "funeral pile" builds a sort of grammatical wall between the flames and the "I"; Shelley writes that the creature will "consume to ashes this miserable frame, that its remains may afford no light to any curious and unhallowed wretch, who would create such another as I have been" (220). When the creature imagines himself on fire, he is merely a "frame" whose "remains" merit the possessive pronoun "its." By the time the "I" finally inserts itself into the sentence, the perspective has shifted such that the personal pronoun is not *acting,* but rather being *acted on.* "I," paired with "such another as," is employed here only as a representation of any creature, any "that" — as a stand-in for *all* beings undeserving of life. The creature understands the pain and beauty he will no longer experience when he dies, but he simultaneously alienates himself from these experiences, universalizes them, suggesting that their disappearance is not *his* loss so much as *a* loss.

I have thus far taken for granted that *Frankenstein*'s denouement, with its gesture toward a future (self-)immolation, allows us to talk concretely about the creature's death, to discuss what it is and is not. But such an analysis relies on the assumption that the creature is *speaking:* that these final words are his, that they are heard and understood, that they manage to communicate an idea. Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" gives us cause for doubt. To conceive the creature as a subaltern — or as a member of a "'true' subaltern group, whose identity is its difference" (80) — is to recognize that his "speech" is inaccessible except insofar as it is filtered through systems and narratives that are not his own. In Spivak's essay, the subaltern is inscribed within "the palimpsestic narrative of imperialism" (76); in *Frankenstein,* the creature finds himself trapped in a similarly palimpsestic narrative that limits the reader's ability to perceive (and trust) his words *as his,* forcing them instead to pass through Frankenstein's account, which is itself flattened into Walton's letters. At the end of the novel, the creature breaks through one of these strata (but not both) when he appears on Walton's boat, thereby removing his creator as the narrative "middleman." We might read this

moment of rupture as a "change of level," a concept Spivak invokes while discussing Foucault's claim that "addressing oneself to [another] layer of material" — in this case, another layer of the narrative machine — can "make visible the unseen" (80-1). The creature's final speech, then, constitutes an attempt to make himself visible in a text that has routinely relegated his experiences to a second- or even third-class status.

But is this attempt successful? Can the creature speak? On the one hand, his address to Walton compresses and thus challenges the novel's three-layered structure. On the other, his putatively *oral* expression of a desire to (self-)immolate never ceases to be filtered through Walton's *written* account of his experiences; a narrow interpretation of the verb "speak" might yield the conclusion that the creature is not speaking in the literal sense, but rather *being written as a speaker* — that he is not being heard, but rather *being read being heard.* More substantively, the creature's final promise, far from eschewing the human concepts and constructs to which he has been exposed during his short life, seems to rely on them. Earlier in *Frankenstein,* the creature, in one of his first interactions with the *manmade,* finds a fire while "oppressed by cold" and "thrust[s] [his] hand into the live embers" (122). He comes to associate fire — and, perhaps, humanness — with a perplexing pain-pleasure dialectic. Of the fire's pleasant warmth and dangerous heat, the creature remarks: "How strange … that the same cause should produce such opposite effects!" (122). Spivak locates a similar tension between pain and pleasure in the act of self-immolation when she writes that "sati … was ideologically cathected as 'reward'" and not "as 'punishment'" (97). If fire, for the creature, is inseparable from man, his prediction in the novel's final pages that he will "*exult* in the *agony* of the torturing flames" (221, emphasis mine) signals a profoundly ambivalent relationship with the notion of the *human,* a conception of the world into which he was born — and of his imminent departure from it — as at once painful and pleasurable. It is clear that the creature does not dread the "suicidal" act; he relishes the promise of "agony." In a

synthesis of the "opposite effects" of fire, he comes to view this pain, perhaps, as the "reward" to which Spivak refers. But his anticipated death — his pain — remains grounded in a human creation (fire) that the creature embraces or appropriates as an agent of "extinction" (221).

Another link between the creature's speech and his proximity to the human world lies in his very use of language. Soon after discovering fire, the creature finds that "these people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds," noting: "the words they spoke sometimes produced *pleasure or pain"* (128-9, emphasis mine). The creature can only communicate his intentions and experiences to Walton — and to the reader — to the extent that he can express himself in words, *as humans do.* The fire he plans to build does not materialize beyond his verbal promise that it will be created in some near but extratextual future; the creature's (self-)immolation is therefore only accessed through Walton's transcription of his "articulate sounds." The final promise, in short, is embedded in an inescapable framework of *humanness*; its expression requires a capitulation to — or an espousal of — a form of social interaction that the creature attributes to "these people [humans]." Also notable is the creature's suggestion that *both* the method of "suicide" (fire) *and* the language used to explain that method are undergirded by a negotiation or reconciliation of the pleasurable and the painful — that words, like (or as) flames, can "[produce] pleasure or pain." This fraught relationship between enjoyment and suffering, wonder and horror, "reward" and "punishment," might be said to delineate the creature's understanding of what it means to be (non)human.

I have asked whether the creature's promise to set himself on fire can reasonably be considered "speech" as Spivak conceives of the term, and I have established that the expression of a desire to (self-)immolate is inseparable from the web of human (and) narrative control spun around Frankenstein's "daemon" throughout the novel. But this

discussion of speech and non-speech, of language and narration, obscures an underlying question about the ways in which saying can overlap with *doing*. J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words,* a seminal text in speech-act theory, proposes a series of cases "in which to *say* something is to *do* something; or in which *by* saying or *in* saying something we are doing something" (12). Austin is particularly interested in the status of promises, bets, and predictions; he distinguishes between statements like "I shall be there," which he terms "primary performatives," and statements like "I promise that I shall be there," which he defines as "explicit performatives" (69). This interpretive framework allows us to remark that the creature's final speech is awash with primary performatives — phrases like "I shall die" and "I shall ascend my funeral pile" (Shelley 221) that make possible, one might contend, a sort of self-immolation through speech. To some extent, we might say the same about *all* written accounts of self-immolation, even Spivak's own descriptions in "Can the Subaltern Speak?"; the word anticipates or promises its referent, but *is not* and *cannot be* that referent. When Spivak writes the word "fire" (99), she does not create a literal fire, but rather "tells" her reader, "I promise that this word will make you think of a fire," thereby binding the noun to its real-life counterpart.

Even if the creature's primary performatives do not render explicit the act of promising, they are readable as verbal contracts with Walton, as commitments to future action. In at least one case, the act to which the (pseudo-)promise refers is fulfilled *within* the bounds of the text: the creature states that "I shall quit your vessel on the ice-raft which brought me hither" and proceeds to "[spring] from the cabin-window … upon the ice-raft which lay close to the vessel" (220-1), thereby "making good" on his commitment and creating a link between his words and his deeds. A similar correspondence between what is said and what is done emerges when the creature utters his last word ("farewell") and leaves

the boat "as he [says] this" (221), such that the act of bidding Walton adieu is simultaneous — and thus entangled — with the *act of acting on* that goodbye.

In addition to starting several sentences with "I shall," the creature directs commands at Walton (and, in a sense, at the reader), declaring: "Fear not that I shall be the instrument of future mischief" (220). Addressing the question of verbs in the imperative mood, Austin notes that "'Shut it, do' resembles the performative 'I order you to shut it'" (73); we might deploy this observation to conclude that "Fear not" resembles "I order you not to fear." Importantly, the creature's command cannot be falsified by Walton's willingness or refusal to accede to it, and in fact it cannot be falsified at all, for it is not a "description" (Austin 70) and has no truth value. We could also, of course, parse the creature's statement as an implicit promise, remarking that "Fear not that I shall be the instrument of future mischief" is comparable to "I promise that I shall not be the instrument of future mischief." In either case, the last few pages of *Frankenstein* brim with speech-acts, with bits of (reported) dialogue whose "uttering … is, or is a part of, the doing of an action" (5). One might go so far as to claim that the creature's performative commitment to future action becomes a life- (or book-) ending act in itself, just as tangible, just as concrete, and just as dangerous as "actual" self-immolation. In that sense, it is misleading to suggest that the novel ends with the creature *saying things, but never doing them.* Rather, the novel ends with the creature saying things *and therefore* doing them.

This vision of the final oration as a set of words that *make things happen* seems to conflict with the previous discussion of the inscription of the creature's "voice" in a narrative machine that regulates and layers speech. Might it be possible to figure the creature's utterances as speech-acts that remain "trapped" within the boundaries sketched by Walton's pen? It is tempting to discount the notion of the subaltern altogether, to claim that the performative quality of the final address's imperatives and *shalls* imbues the creature with an

activeness that allows him to transcend the novel's restrictive frame. A similarly alluring argument would have us believe that the speech's (partial) evasion of *truth value* grants the reader an unmediated access to the creature's words by freeing them from the layers of trust and mistrust, hearsay and reportage, that characterize most of the text. But it remains the case that *Frankenstein* is a frame narrative, and it would be disingenuous to argue that the grammatical structures employed by the creature in the span of a few pages are sufficient to deconstruct that frame. After all, the notion of the speech-act is entirely compatible with Spivak's titular question. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" seems to assume an expansive conception of speech that encompasses, for instance, sati — which Spivak refers to as the "act of sati" (99) — and other public-facing acts. The categorization of words as deeds, or as word-deeds, is thus not a magical escape valve. The creature's final speech — and it is indeed a *speech* — remains confined to the "epistolary frames" (Oates 549) through which it is conveyed, regardless of where one plots it on an imagined Cartesian plane of doing and saying.

Spivak gestures in her analyses of *Frankenstein* toward the possibility of an escape from Shelley's frame. In "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," she writes:

> "In terms of narrative logic, [the creature] "is 'lost in darkness and distance' … into an existential
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> temporality that is coherent with neither the territorializing individual imagination … nor the
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> authoritative scenario of Christian psychobiography." (259)

What Spivak does not make explicit in this account of the novel's final lines is that it is *Walton* who describes the creature's disappearance into "darkness and distance." The creature is only "lost" insofar as Walton *reports* that he is lost; the "existential temporality" into which he travels is only incoherent with "the territorializing individual imagination" to the extent

that Walton — who, in this case, *is* the territorializing individual imagination — represents that incoherence to the reader. In other words, the monster's escape is relayed to us by the very voice that he is purported to escape. I am therefore inclined to disagree with Spivak's own characterization of *Frankenstein* as a text that "does not deploy the axiomatics of imperialism" (254).

Indeed, Shelley's — or at least Walton's — deployment of "the palimpsestic narrative of imperialism" ("Subaltern" 76) is evident in the novel's opening pages; the first information extractable from the body of the text is that Walton's letters are sent to (and written for) "Mrs. Saville, England" (51). Restating *Frankenstein*'s frame in geographical terms is illuminating: Walton, an Englishman, has left England and is crafting accounts of his experiences in foreign waters that are then sent back to England, where they are read and (mis)interpreted by domestic eyes. In his first letter to Mrs. Saville, Walton's articulation of his project in the icy Arctic recalls — and perhaps perpetuates — colonial discourses of "discovery" and "newness." He aims to "satiate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of a world never before visited, and [to] tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man" (52). *This* is the novel's outermost narrative frame, the layer through which all the creature's words and acts must pass. The final scene, far from collapsing the novel's narrative strata and imbuing the creature with some semblance of agency, thus engenders a pseudo-imperialist ventriloquism according to which Walton, the "explorer," crosses paths with a strange and foreign creature, the "daemon," and packages his words (or his speech-acts) for British consumption. In the context of this interpretation, the creature's disappearance into "darkness and distance" is indicative not of some escape into an "existential temporality" but rather of Walton's own perception of the landscapes that surround him as barren, uninhabited, and *discoverable.* If anything, the novel's final lines emphasize Walton's narrative partiality: by indicating that the creature is only "lost" because Walton *cannot see him anymore,* they

retroactively call into question the supposed neutrality of the framed or "filtered" testimonies that comprise most of the text.

If the creature's last words in some sense *become* Walton's words through the act of letter-writing, it is worth considering *how* that transfer of narrative agency operates within the text. One obvious but crucial distinction lies in the difference between speaking and writing: both Frankenstein and the creature *tell* their stories, while Walton *writes* his (and theirs). This "writtenness" allows Walton to manipulate time in ways that an oral storyteller perhaps cannot, dancing from past to present, present to past. Indeed, the novel's last few pages rely on — and take for granted — a temporal distortion that is easily overlooked in the thrill of the creature's fiery promises. Walton is "interrupted" by a "sound … from the cabin where the remains of Frankenstein still lie." After deciding to "examine" the provenance of these noises, he bids his sister "good night" (217). The first sentence of the next paragraph, which begins without any section break or temporal mediation, reads: "Great God!" A momentous "scene has just taken place," a "final and wonderful catastrophe" (217) that Walton seems to both dread and savor. But the scene is in the past; all the surprises of the book's final pages, all the descriptions the creature provides of his imminent death, exist as one (British) man's memories. In that sense, the final speech ceases to belong to the creature. Walton claims these words, alienates them from their speaker, defining them not in terms of *what he said* but rather in terms of *what I heard.* Any agency achieved by the creature with his commands and promises, with his sentences that make things happen, is subsumed by the writerly appropriation of those speech-acts, the translation of one being's past into another being's present. In short, *Frankenstein*'s denouement — and, perhaps, *Frankenstein* as a whole — centers on the act of representation, *not* on that which is represented.

This interpretation of the creature's "promised" self-immolation raises broader questions about how speech-acts function — or do not function — in scenarios of colonial or

narrative subjugation. Embracing the notion of words making things happen without interrogating how those *things* might be limited, manufactured, or otherwise controlled by larger systems risks producing overly simplistic readings of complex texts, readings that ignore the possibility of voices being layered, filtered, framed. But reconciling Austin's theories with Spivak's writing on sati and the subaltern allows a more balanced consideration of the creature's role in the final pages of *Frankenstein.* The creature utters primary performatives that transcend — or partially transcend — limiting notions of truth and falsehood, *yet* these grammatical forms are recalled and reported by Walton. The creature asserts his intention to set his "frame" — and, perhaps, the narrative frame that has been constructed around him — on fire, *yet* this desire is inseparable from his contact with *humanness* throughout the novel. *Frankenstein*'s ending thus serves as a microcosm of the book's complexities and contradictions. It is at once hopeful and disheartening, hot and cold, painfully tangible and irreparably remote. At the very least, the creature's words *make things happen* in that they move and disturb us. They become metaliterary speech-acts, tethered to the visceral response provoked in the reader by their utterance. Perhaps this tie to the reader, this emotional binding of the worlds on and beyond the page, constitutes the creature's final rebellion against Walton's pen.

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