THE PROBLEM OF FRANKENSTEIN
[1977]

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The novel Frankenstein; Or, The Modern Prometheus by Mary Shelley has cast a strong fascination over western society ever since its appearance in 1818. And this interest continues unabated today, in the form of films, teleplays, stage plays, critical studies, even children's cartoons. Frankenstein has become a cultural myth; people say it speaks to them, to the modern condition.

Frankenstein is one of the few living symbols left in our soul-less age. Perhaps this is because it’s a story about loss of soul, about the struggle to be human. The usual interpretation—overly ambitious man spawns technological monster—merely scratches the surface of the great problem posed in this story, the story which begins with a question: “Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay/to mould Me man? Did I solicit thee/From darkness to promote me?”1 In telling us this story about a man who fails, Mary Shelley reaches into the heart of an archetypal problem, which also contains as well the roots of success. In examining the forces at work here, we can unfold the creative numen that heals the ignorance and bloodshed of Frankenstein's world, a world all too much like our own.

Frankenstein is a tale of conflict, of irreconcilable contradiction. This conflict rages between Frankenstein and his nameless Creation. Like Kafka’s anonymous accusers, this Creation is the form of Frankenstein’s guilt come to haunt him with nameless cries for revenge. Like Kafka’s bewildered victims, Frankenstein knows he is guilty, without knowing what he has done. There is even a deeper similarity here: we now know that all Kafka’s stories depict in disguised form a personal dilemma, the love between men condemned by society; the nameless accusations are in reality charges of homosexuality.2 And Frankenstein’s dilemma also is intimately involved with love between men. But in this case Frankenstein stands accused of lovelessness.

It’s not surprising that much of western literature should be concerned with this issue, for this issue is basic to western society. Forbidden, damned, punished again and again, the forms of this love fester in the darkness, breeding monsters. This love I refer to is archetypal, universal. It is called gay love, of which homosexuality is one aspect. However, we are concerned here not with instinctual acts, but with the primordial roots, the numinous source; Frankenstein is not accused of being a latent homosexual. If we can characterize western society as a form of masculinity alienated from the feminine,3 then from a different angle it is a form of masculinity alienated from itself. The same impulse which condemns women and the eternally feminine also condemns gay men and the brotherhood of souls.4

Jung characterized the soul as a contrasexual element, compensation for the one-sided ego; “lady soul” he called the inner being of a man. But if we step back a moment, might we not see that this opinion itself is a bit one-sided? Do not we sense in Jung’s attitude a great fascination for his “Anima,” manifested in his private life as well as in his writings? I suspect there is a bias here; if Jung, by chance, had been a gay person his psychology might have been different in some respects. As it is, his work was an expression of his own personal individuation and thereby contained those limitations inherent in any single person’s experience. Although he had some positive comments to make about gay men, his views, I feel, are definitely those of an outsider, an alien, and carry a negative tone.5

I would go farther, and suggest that because of the overwhelming cultural emphasis on love between the sexes coupled with condemnation of same-sex love, Jung and the Jungians em-
phasized the contrasexual eros in the soul and de-emphasized the homosexual eros. This eros in part was relegated to the nefarious realm of the shadow. Constricted by such a limited imagination, it’s no wonder that the homosexual eros of the soul has withheld many of its secrets.

We must face this clearly: the erotic, numinous, alluringly dangerous soul is as much masculine as feminine. I have suggested the name double for this complement to the anima/us. Characterization of the soul as a double of the person is very old and very widespread. The Egyptians called it ka, which had “the same features, the same gait, even the same dress as the man himself.” Many European occultists, such as Paracelsus, Böehm and Swedenborg, believed each person had an astral body, or soul-covering, which appeared exactly as the physical body. The Hurons thought the soul was “a complete little model of the man himself,” an opinion they shared with the Malays. The Aranda of Australia believed that people were reincarnations of ancestral spirit-beings, “whose doubles they in reality are.” This soul-double manifested in one’s shadow, reflection in water, or portrait. We still speak of the “shades” of the dead, who are often portrayed as pale reflections of the living persons. In traditional Chinese culture a person’s “image, especially if pictorial or sculptured, and thus approaching close to the reality, is an alter ego of the living reality, an abode of the soul, nay it is that reality itself.” One could influence or harm the soul of another through an image, as is still done today in the Caribbean, through Voodoo.

The nature of this soul-double is revealed in a Gnostic text, The Hymn of the Pearl. In this tale a boy, sent on a journey to the East in search of a special pearl, becomes lost and forgets his quest. But one day his memory returns and, finding the pearl, he returns home, to “the kingdom of [his] father’s house.” As he approaches, he tells us that

My robe of glory which I had put off and my mantle which went over it, my parents... sent to meet me by their treasurers who were entrusted therewith. Its splendor I had forgotten, having left it as a child in my father’s house. As I now beheld the robe, it seemed to me suddenly to become a mirror-image of myself: myself entire I saw in it, and it entire I saw in myself, that we were two in separateness and yet again one in the sameness of our forms.

The “robe of glory” is the form of one’s own godliness. An Indian parable puts it this way:

Behold, upon the self-same tree,
two birds, fast-bound companions, sit.
This one enjoys the ripened fruit,
The other looks, but does not eat.

On such a tree my spirit crouched,
Deluded by its powerlessness,
Till seeing with Joy how great its Lord,
It found from sorrow swift release...

We might call the double an embodiment of the spirit of the self, “that inner friend of the soul” concerned with one’s self-realization. In myths and tales he is that twin who aids his brother in heroic quests, or rescues him when he gets into trouble, as in the fairy tale “The Two Brothers.” Often he appears as the immortal twin, an embodiment or agent of a god. Thus with Enkidu in The Epic of Gilgamesh, who is explicitly created by the gods for the hero. In the Am-
phitryon, an immensely popular myth with the Greeks and, later, the Romans and Renaissance Europeans, Zeus impersonates the man Amphitryon in order to deceive his wife Alcmena. He lays with her, and nine months later she gives birth to twins, Iphicles fathered by Amphitryon, and Heracles fathered by Zeus. If we view Amphitryon/Zeus as one being, then we see that it is one’s soul-double, as agent of the self, which generates the hero, the quest for individuality.

Among many peoples this sense of soul-double resulted in the idea that two—the identical pair—was a more perfect representation of the whole, of the strength and oneness of a person. Thus twins were seen as numinous, and often worshipped.17 This belief held in much of Africa,18 Australia,19 as well as among peoples of the ancient Mediterranean. Dioscuri were very prominent in Thebes as well as Sparta, which also had twin kings. The Romans, in their turn, “were fascinated by the idea of twins. Two legendary founders were better than one; two men named Scipio could finally take the measure of Carthage; two consuls should share the executive office.”20 A similar manifestation of the double concerned the institution of blood-brotherhood, of two men united forever in each other’s hearts and interests. This institution occurred worldwide, and was a prominent feature in many societies.21

In stories of twins and brothers we generally find two motifs—that of the loving, supportive brother, and that of the antagonistic brother. I have termed these the partner and the competitor, respectively, who appear in the Iliad, for example, as Patroclus and Hector. However, as you might expect, the partner and the competitor are secretly one, or opposite sides of the same function. Whether the double appears in positive or negative form depends in large part on the attitude of the ego. For example, in the tale of Monkey by Wu Ch’eng-en, a sixteenth-century writer from Kingsu,

the king of Crowcock, who has ill-treated the Bodhisattva Manjuśrī, a divinity disguised as a begging priest, is punished by Buddha by being replaced on the throne for three years by Manjuśrī’s blue-maned lion-steed, which is turned into a counterfeit of the king, and drowns him in a well...The king’s remorse earns forgiveness, resuscitation and reinstatement.22

In this tale, which also exists in several independent European versions, the king is closed off from his deeper self, the realm of spirit represented by the begging priest. The soul-double, sent to illuminate the king, appears as a usurper and murderer. However, as soon as the king accepts his error he gains rapport with the great source of the divine and the competitor withdraws.

The unity of competitor and partner is again revealed in The Epic of Gilgamesh, where Enkidu functions in both roles. At first he opposes Gilgamesh, but they realize their love during a wrestling match. And then they undertake their heroic quests.

The first approach of the double may appear as a challenge, “because we cannot get accustomed to the idea that we are not absolute master in our own home.”23 The selfishness of the ego can only see it’s soul-twin as a usurper. This is the problem with Gilgamesh. He has no deep or vital concerns, and squanders his time in petty abuses of his kingly rights. Enkidu, who brings the keys to great mysteries, only seems like an obstacle to the ego’s arrogant pursuits: “The bride waited for the bridegroom, but in the night Gilgamesh got up and came to the house. Then Enkidu stepped out, he stood in the street and blocked the way. Mighty Gilgamesh came on and Enkidu met him at the gate. He put out his foot and prevented Gilgamesh from entering the house, so they grappled, holding each other like bulls.”24 Enkidu confronts Gilgamesh with his own narrowness.

This wrestling match, then, becomes the pivotal test for Gilgamesh. The creative numen
is at stake—to die in their mutual hate or be born through their union. The solution is a mysterious one: “Gilgamesh bent his knee with his foot planted on the ground, and with a turn Enkidu was thrown. Then immediately his fury died. When Enkidu was thrown he said to Gilgamesh, ‘There is not another like you in the world....for your strength surpasses the strength of men.’ So Enkidu and Gilgamesh embraced and their friendship was sealed.” It might seem as if Gilgamesh has defeated Enkidu, but this is not so; Enkidu doesn't acknowledge defeat, but rather the hero's strength, his ability to hold his own in the contest. We see this more clearly in the parallel story of Jacob and Esau in the Old Testament.

In this tale Jacob flees from his wrathful twin Esau, because he has stolen the blessing Isaac intended for Esau. Years later Jacob must return, but is afraid Esau will try to destroy him. The night before they meet, Jacob wrestles with a strange man; “the man saw that he could not throw Jacob...[and] said, ‘Let me go, for day is breaking,’ but Jacob replied, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’ He said to Jacob, What is your name?,’ and he answered, ‘Jacob.’ The man said, ‘Your name shall no longer be Jacob but Israel, because you strove with God and man, and prevailed’...[and] he gave him his blessing there.” In the morning Jacob meets Esau peacefully and without harm.

From both these stories we see that the solution to the problem of the competitor is to meet him and embrace him. By summoning the strength to be intimate, not to flee from him or destroy him, but to hold him despite the force of diametric opposition, he is transformed into a blessing. It is this erotic gesture, the seed of love in the pit of hate, by which the ego can release the soul’s creativity denied through the ego’s own selfishness.

The function of the competitor, in effect, is to confront the ego with itself, with its own limitations. The soul puts on a mask of one’s own sterility and fruitlessness in order to taunt complacency. This, needless to say, is a vital function: the competitor is a form whereby our ignorance moves us to individuation. It is the ego’s watchdog, signaling the need for new openness, for deeper strengths and skills. The successful ego may move through cycles of challenge and rapport, in which confrontation releases creative development, which in turn leads to new resistances.

Of course the tension caused by the competitor can be very dangerous indeed, for it is negative in tone, hateful, frustrated, jealous. The gap may be too wide to bridge, the ego too proud or too weak. Then one is damned to perpetual conflict like the brothers in the Norse Hettel saga, whose forgetfulness of their siblinghood plunges them into eternal conflict. Or else one flees from the challenge, thereby summoning a revengeful ghost, the Death of the soul. The road to growth is shut, leaving death-in-life, insanity, murder or suicide.

In reflecting one’s own condition, the competitor may take on aspects of the shadow. Indeed, there isn’t always a clear distinction between double and shadow, and one’s soul-twin may shade off into a rather ugly fellow, a depraved wretch, or even something non-human. In many societies it was believed that the soul could appear in one’s shadow as well as or instead of in one’s reflection. And it was a common belief that an evil sorcerer or witch could impersonate, steal or control one’s soul-twin through the shadow. Thus the double may confront a person as her or his own inferior ego, full of malice. A classic example is Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Another occurs in Tolkien’s Ring trilogy, in which the Iliad’s triad of Achilles, Patroclus and Hector becomes that of Frodo, Sam and Gollum. On the other hand, a partner-figure may complement the ego with valuable shadow-characteristics. The German writer Jean Paul was very fond of such twins, who are the central motif of most of his stories; he says of one pair of identical twins that “love made their faces unlike each other’s; each saw in the other only what he loved outside himself...”
The competitor who brings madness, murder or suicide was a favorite theme among Romantic and post-Romantic Western writers. It appears in the work of E.T.A. Hoffmann (*Elixiere, Der Sandmann*), Poe (*William Wilson*), A. von Chamisso (*Peter Schlemihl*), Hans Anderson (*The Shadow*), Grillparzer (*Traum ein Leben*), Maupassant (*Le Horla*), Dostoevski (*The Brothers Karamazov, The Double*), and Oscar Wilde (*The Fisherman and his Soul*), among many others. It was a very popular theme at the time Mary Shelley was writing her novel.

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If we can say that today’s society is practically soul-less, then we might describe England in 1818 as the place where the soul first began to disappear in earnest. The Napoleonic wars were just over; industrialism and imperialism were moving into high gear. Society demanded great entrepreneurial capitalists and bold aggressive administrators with few moral qualms. Social roles, and especially sex roles, were being locked into exaggerated norms as people braced themselves for vast material changes. The age reeked with moral dogmatism and hypocrisy. Against this tide the rebellious Romantics wrote poems and painted pictures, but their cause was very unpopular. Mary’s lover Percy Shelley was “reviled as a monster” by most of the English.

It was into this milieu that Mary Shelley introduced Frankenstein and his Creation. We are told that Frankenstein was the son of a prominent citizen of Geneva. His childhood was very happy, and he grew up surrounded by gentle, loving parents, siblings and friends. However, at an early age he became devoted to unlocking “the secrets of heaven and earth...the inner spirit of nature and the mysterious soul of man.” While away at college, Frankenstein discovers the new physical sciences and with them the means to realize his dreams. During his researches he comes upon a great secret, the ability “of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter.” He resolves to create a human being. After months of the most intense work, “on a dreary night of November” he gives life to a body built with his own hands. But at the very moment when the Creature opens his eyes, “breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room...” Frankenstein sees his Creature as the most ugly thing in the world; he exclaims that “no mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A mummy again endowed with animation could not be so hideous.” As he lapses into a deep “nervous fever” his Creation blindly wanders out into the surrounding forest.

And now we discover the great contradiction in this tale, for it turns out that contrary to his appearance the Creature is a deeply sensitive, kind, generous being. As he tells us after learning to speak, “I was benevolent. My soul glowed with love and humanity.” He’s even a pacifist and a vegetarian! But everywhere he turns, people run screaming from him; they beat him and shoot at him for no reason, as soon as they see him. He feels utterly unloved, utterly alone and abandoned. Then his bewilderment and pain gradually give way to hatred; “the mildness of my nature had fled, and all within me was turned to gall and bitterness.” The Creature vows revenge; as he tells Frankenstein, “if I cannot inspire love, I will cause fear, and chiefly toward you my arch-enemy, because my creator, do I swear inextinguishable hatred.” The Creature then goes about destroying those Frankenstein loves most, his brother, his best friend, his bride and his father, after which he leads Frankenstein to his death on the Arctic sea.

Frankenstein dared to delve below the shallow, mundane world of middle-class propriety and triviality. The members of his family and his friends, indeed Frankenstein himself, are charming, good-hearted, thoroughly cardboard figures. They’re wrapped up in the false society of the collectivity: Elizabeth, Frankenstein’s beloved, is the daughter of a merchant, whose interests center on children and household furnishings; Henry, his best friend, also a merchant’s son,
wants to assist “the progress of European colonization and trade” in India. None of the characters in \textit{Frankenstein}, with one exception, has any idea of the reality of being human; they have no depth, no substance, no soul.

And that exception is the Creature. In relation to his creator, he is more imaginative, more intellectual, more emotional, in short, “more human.” In a penetrating way he reveals how heartless and shortsighted people are, what he calls “the barbarity of man.” He is, in fact, the soul, that which Frankenstein lacks.

As the character Walton, an analog of Frankenstein, says to his sister at the very beginning of the novel,

But I have one want which I have never yet been able to satisfy and the absence of the object of which I now feel as a most severe evil...I desire the company of a man who could sympathize with me, whose eyes could reply to mine...I bitterly feel the want of a friend. I have no one near me, gentle yet courageous, possessed of a cultivated as well as of a capacious mind, whose tastes are like my own, to approve or amend my plans. How would such a friend repair the faults of your poor brother!

Frankenstein, in his search for truth and wisdom, conjures up such a friend, his double, the agent necessary to his further development. This friend comes to him with open arms, lovingly. But the face he turns to Frankenstein is the mirror of Frankenstein’s own self-alienation, his crucial fault, his “failure to love.” This is too deep, too painful, for Frankenstein to face. He flees in terror, thus rejecting the challenge of the soul and converting his potential partner into a fiendish competitor.

The heart of the problem is embedded in the conflict between an archetypal truth and a taboo of the collective: that the bond between an ego and its partner is by its very nature gay love, a love which the collective opposes. We see in the contrast between the inner being of the Creature and how others perceive him an exact parallel to the situation of gay people in western society. It’s difficult at this time of awakening tolerance to appreciate the breadth and depth of anti-gayness which held sway over Europe, especially in the last century.

The history of gay men in England reveals the extent of society’s malice. Sodomy was punishable by death from the reign of Henry VIII until 1861, when it was made an imprisonable felony. Prior to 1861, gay people were commonly hung, and even burned at the stake. A commentator in 1699 notes that homosexuality is “a crime that sinks a man below the basest epithet, is so foul it admits of no aggravation and cannot be expressed in its horrors but by the doleful shrieks and groans of the damned.”

Physical expressions of gay love were seen with such loathing and horror that it wasn’t even named, but rather called “the unmentionable sin,” the crime \textit{inter Christianos non nominandum}. Plato wasn’t even taught in English schools until the 1840s, due to his gayness. People convicted by courts were sometimes lynched by mobs before the sentence could be carried out. In 1810, eight years before \textit{Frankenstein} was published, the landlord and five others of a male brothel in London were sentenced to prison, before which they had to stand one hour in the pillory. During this time they were mercilessly pelted with brickbats, dead cats, rotten eggs, potatoes, mud and buckets filled with blood, offal and dung. A contemporary account describes the victims’ journey by cart through the streets of the city:
it is impossible for language to convey an adequate idea of the universal expressions of execration, which accompanied these monsters on their journey...before the cart reached Temple Bar, the wretches were so thickly covered with mud that a vestige of the human figure was barely discernible...Some of them were cut in the head with brickbats and bled profusely. The streets, as they passed, resounded with the universal shouts and execrations of the populace. 36

Might not we see in this account Frankenstein’s Creature, so covered with mud that nobody could even see “the human figure”?

In perhaps the most revealing statement in *Frankenstein*, the Creature pleads for acceptance from a blind man. He says of people that “unfortunately, they are prejudiced against me. I have good dispositions. My life has been hitherto harmless and in some degree beneficial, but a fatal prejudice clouds their eyes, and where they ought to see a feeling and kind friend they behold only a detestable monster.” These same words could easily have been spoken by Oscar Wilde, who at his trial in 1892 defined “the love that dare not speak its name” as “that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect….It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it may be described as ‘the Love that dare not speak its name,’ and on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it.” 37 This was in contrast to the universal, hysterical loathing that accompanied the Wilde trials and broke the artist’s life as well as his creativity. I might add that even today gay people are still often seen as monsters, and brutally punished. 38

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I believe that *Frankenstein* was written in reaction to the “progress” of science, technology and industrialism. With deep and probably unconscious insight Shelley showed that the men who created such progress were incapable of taking responsibility for their creations, because these creations were manifestations of that hidden universal energy which, in humans, formed the deeper psyche, the soul spirit, a spirit estranged from men’s egos. This estrangement was a continuing problem in western society which has manifested itself in the oppression of gay people, among many other forms. Through ignorance people opposed the soul-twin with its homosexual eros, and rather than accept the challenge which such an attitude brought, they fled from it and condemned it. Technology opened up new dimensions for the deepening of this self-alienation, allowing malice to exert itself with ever increasing effectiveness.

Near the end of *Frankenstein*, Frankenstein tells a magistrate that he created a “monster” who has committed all the murders. But the magistrate thinks he has merely become delirious with grief, to which Frankenstein responds: “‘Man,’ I cried, ‘how ignorant art thou in thy pride. Cease, you know not what it is you say.’” Ignorance is the real criminal in this tale, and because of it a man in search of enlightenment instead condemns himself to destruction. This is the risk one takes in meeting the soul-twin, who wants to lead one down a difficult road, and whose first appearance is in fact the beginning of that journey.

Frankenstein’s Creature, his double, is the guide on the path of his individuation. The Creature’s ugliness is the eros of that guide, its libido, seen through the eyes of society’s shadow. This eros is the creativity of the double. It marks the creature with a sign, just as Cain is marked in Herman Hesse’s *Damian*; as Damian explains to Emil, Cain bore a sign such that “he struck people as faintly sinister, perhaps a little more intellect and boldness in his look than people were used to. This man was powerful: you would approach him only with awe. He had a ‘sign.’ You could explain this any way you wished. And people always want what is agreeable to them, and
puts them in the right…So they did not interpret the sign for what it was—a mark of distinction—but as its opposite.”

The Creature’s ugliness was the sign of Frankenstein’s attachment to the collective identity and his fear of becoming himself: “The bodily eye that recoils from Frankenstein’s creature…thereby betrays the mind to the impostures of orthodoxy.” In truth, the Creature isn’t ugly at all, but beautiful and full of light. He is the agent of Jesus’s dictum:

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I come to set man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man’s foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father and mother more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and follow after me, is not worthy of me…He that findeth his life shall lose it and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.

Ultimately, the double is a psychopomp sent by Christ/Satan. He (or she, as the case may be) carries Lucifer’s torch, and wields the lamb’s sword. In this guise he is not to be denied, and our avoidance only brings on Frankenstein’s fate. In this dilemma the more difficult choice is the only choice we really have.

Shelley’s *Frankenstein* tells us that the repressed contains the seeds of enlightenment. And this is true not only for the individual in relation to the soul, but for people in relation to each other and for society in general. So much of western culture is bound up in a competitor theme, we might say that it’s competitor-constellated. And this manifests not only in the more obvious forms of competition, in contentiousness, in “looking for a fight” as they say. Whether it be in business, international relations, sports or friendships, people too often are concerned with gaining at the other’s advantage, taking things, getting ahead, trying to win. People want to impress others, appear assured, competent, so as to “succeed” in a job or with a lover. Too many are concerned only with what the ego wants, or has been trained to desire.

As Hillman has noted, this ego is a manifestation of the “animus,” that is, the complement to the anima. But I would interpret this “animus” to be not so much the double as that part of it captured in the English definition of animus: deep seated hostility and antagonism. That is, the western ego, itself, with its haughty pride, its arrogance and suspiciousness, reflects the competitor, thereby revealing its state of ignorance and self-alienation.

The solution to this social problem lies with those who society has ostracized. They contain the seeds of change which society has rejected as vile, ugly, perverted. Just as mental patients can show us the meaning of madness, and feminist women the truth of the feminine, so gay people harbor the key of gentle rapport, the harmony of “brotherly love.” If society wishes to heal its self-estrangement, then it must look behind the hated covering of these misfits and grasp the call of the soul. Then it will be surprised to discover that weakness turns to strength and reveals a path into the greater mysteries.
Endnotes

1 Paradise Lost, X, 743-45.
5 See CW 7, pars. 173 and 178; CW 9i, pars. 146 and 162-164.
10 Frazer, p. 27.
14 CW 9i, par. 213.
15 CW 9i, par. 275.
22 Tymms, p. 19.
23 CW 9i, par. 235.
27 Tymms, p. 30.
28 See Tymms for an exhaustive survey.
31 [All references to Frankenstein are taken from my personal paperback copy of the “later revised edition of 1831” as published by Pyramid Books, New York, 1957—this note added 2007].
36 Hyde, pp. 81-82.
37 Hyde, p. 1.
41 King James Version, Matthew X: 34-39.

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