

# I

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## Making a “monster”: an introduction to *Frankenstein*

Mary Shelley’s waking nightmare on June 16, 1816, gave birth to one of the most powerful horror stories of Western civilization. *Frankenstein* can claim the status of a myth so profoundly resonant in its implications that it has become, at least in its barest outline, a trope of everyday life. The condemners of genetically modified meats and vegetables now refer to them as “Frankenfoods,” and the debates concerning the morality of cloning or stem cell engineering constantly invoke the cautionary example of Frankenstein’s monster. Nor is the monster-myth cited only in regard to the biological sciences; critics of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons alike often make use of this monitory figure. Of course, both the media and the average person in the street have frequently and mistakenly assigned the name of Frankenstein not to the maker of the monster but to his creature. But as we shall see, this “mistake” actually derives from a crucial intuition about the relationship between them. *Frankenstein* is our culture’s most penetrating literary analysis of the psychology of modern “scientific” man, of the dangers inherent in scientific research, and of the horrifying but predictable consequences of an uncontrolled technological exploitation of nature and the female.

Let us begin, then, with the question of origins: why did the eighteen-year-old Mary Shelley give birth to this particular idea on this particular night? How did it come about that she produced so prescient, powerful, and enduring a myth? In attempting to answer these questions, we must also take into account the various ways in which Mary Shelley responded to the philosophical ideas and literary influences of her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, and her father, William Godwin; these particular influences are taken up at length in the following chapter. But as we shall see, in *Frankenstein*, Shelley also turns a skeptical eye on the Enlightenment celebration of science and technology and, no less critically, on her husband, the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, and their friend, Lord Byron.

## Origins of the text

From the feminist perspective which has dominated discussions of *Frankenstein* in the last decade (see chapter 3), this is first and foremost a book about what happens when a man tries to procreate without a woman. As such, the novel is profoundly concerned with natural as opposed to unnatural modes of production and reproduction. In Shelley's introduction to the revised 1831 edition, she tells a story, of how she, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Byron, and Byron's doctor, William Polidori, after reading ghost stories together one rainy evening near Geneva in June, 1816, agreed each to write a thrilling horror story; how she tried for days to think of a story, but failed; and finally, how on June 15, after hearing Byron and her husband discussing experiments concerning "the principle of life," she fell into a waking dream in which she saw "the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together" (*F* 1831, Intro. 55). In this reverie, she felt the terror *he* felt as the hideous corpse he had reanimated with a "spark of life" stood beside his bed, "looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes" (*F* 1831, Intro. 55).

As critic Ellen Moers pointed out in her classic essay on *Frankenstein* (1974),<sup>1</sup> only eighteen months earlier, Mary Shelley had given birth for the first time to a baby girl, a baby whose death two weeks later produced a recurring dream that she recorded in her journal: "Dream that my little baby came to life again – that it had only been cold & that we rubbed it by the fire & it lived – I awake & find no baby" (*J* 70). Six months before, on January 24, 1816, her second child, William, was born. She doubtless expected to be pregnant again in the near future, and indeed, she conceived her third child, Clara Everina, only six months later in December. Mary Shelley's reverie unleashed her deepest subconscious anxieties, the natural fears of a very young woman embarking on the processes of pregnancy, giving birth, and mothering. As many such newly pregnant women have asked, What if my child is born deformed, in Shelley's phrase, a "hideous" thing? Could I still love it, or would I wish it had never been born? What will happen if I cannot love it? Am I capable of raising a healthy, normal child? One reason Shelley's novel reverberates so strongly with its readers, especially its female readers, is that it articulates in unprecedented detail the most powerfully felt anxieties about pregnancy and parenting.

Mary Shelley's dream thus gives rise to a central theme of the novel: Victor Frankenstein's total failure as a parent. The moment his child is "born," Frankenstein rejects him in disgust, fleeing from his smiling embrace, and completely abandoning him. Victor's horror is caused both by his creature's appearance – his yellow skin which "scarcely covered the work of

muscles and arteries underneath,” his “shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips” (*F* I iv 34)<sup>2</sup> and by his tremendous size. For in an effort to simplify the process of creation, Frankenstein has chosen to work with larger-than-normal human and animal body parts, constructing a being who is of “gigantic stature, that is to say, about eight feet in height” (at a time when the average male was only 5’6” tall) and “proportionably large” (*F* I iv 32). Never once has Frankenstein asked himself whether such a gigantic creature would wish to be created, or what his own responsibilities toward such a creature might be.

Mary Shelley’s novel relentlessly tracks the consequences of such parental abandonment: Victor’s unloved “child,” after desperately seeking a home and family with the De Laceys and, later, with a mate, is rejected on both counts; Felix de Lacey flees in terror and Frankenstein cruelly reneges on his promise to create an Eve for this Adam. In time, the creature turns to violence and revenge, killing not only Victor’s brother William but also his bride Elizabeth and his best friend Clerval. Here Shelley presciently reveals a now-familiar paradigm: the abused child who becomes an abusive, battering adult and parent; note that the creature’s first victim, William Frankenstein, is a child that he had hoped to adopt as his own. That Shelley modeled this child both in name and appearance on her own son William suggests even deeper anxieties about herself as a mother.

### “My hideous progeny”

Mary Shelley’s anxiety surrounding birth and parenting also resonates in her representations of her own literary authority. In the 1831 Introduction, she refers to *Frankenstein* as her “hideous progeny” (*F* 1831, Intro. 56). This metaphor of book as baby suggests Shelley’s anxieties about giving birth to her self-as-author. But Shelley’s anxiety about her authorship did not derive from what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have famously called a female “anxiety of authorship,” the fear of speaking in public in a literary culture that systematically denigrated women’s writing.<sup>3</sup> Rather, her anxiety was produced by both Godwin’s and Percy Shelley’s expectation that she would become a writer like her mother. Alone among the participants in the ghost-story writing contest, she felt a compulsion to perform, but at the same time, as she later recalled, “that blank incapability of invention which is the greatest misery of authorship, when dull Nothing replies to our anxious invocations” (*F* 1831, Intro. 54); apparently, she feared the trauma of barrenness as much as the trauma of birth. As Barbara Johnson has trenchantly observed, *Frankenstein* is “the story of the experience of writing *Frankenstein*.”<sup>4</sup> And since the book represents her authorial self, Mary Shelley dedicated it to

her father, William Godwin, even though he had disowned her after her elopement with the already-married Percy Shelley.

Accordingly, the events of the novel mirror the dates of Mary Shelley's own conception and birth. *Frankenstein* is narrated in a series of letters written by the sea-captain Robert Walton to his sister, Margaret Walton Saville (whose initials, M. W. S., are those Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin coveted and gained when she married the widowed Percy Shelley on December 30, 1816). The novel's first letter is dated December 11, 17–; the last, September 12, 17–. Exactly nine months enwomb the telling of the history of Frankenstein; moreover, these nine months correspond almost exactly with Mary Shelley's third pregnancy, for Clara Everina was born on September 2, 1817. Based on the internal calendar in the novel and on manuscript evidence garnered by Charles E. Robinson,<sup>5</sup> we can reliably date Walton's letters to December 1796 – September 1797; Mary Shelley was born on August 30, 1797, and her mother died on September 10, 1797, two days before Walton's final epistle. Thus, Victor Frankenstein's death, the creature's promised suicide, and Wollstonecraft's death from puerperal fever can all be seen as the consequences of the same creation, the birth of Mary Godwin-the-author.

Our focus on birth, reproduction, and authority, raises a provocative question: if Victor Frankenstein's ambition is to "give birth" asexually, what is the fate of sexual desire in this novel? One possible answer – that it is repressed – aligns *Frankenstein* with the genre of the Gothic novel. As David Punter has shrewdly observed, the Gothic novel deals centrally with paranoia, the taboo, and the barbaric, with everything that a given culture most fears and tries hardest to repress.<sup>6</sup> The male-authored masterpieces of the genre – Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), William Beckford's *Vathek* (1786 [English edn.]), Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), all written by avowed homosexuals or bisexuals – uncover the damage caused by compulsory heterosexuality. By contrast, the female-authored Gothic novel, most notably in the works of Ann Radcliffe, Charlotte Dacre, Sophia Lee, and Emily Brontë, explores the cultural repression of all female sexual desire in the name of the chaste, modest, proper lady – a lady confined within a patriarchal bourgeois domesticity and often menaced by a looming threat of incest. Mary Shelley's novel diverges in at least two respects from the Gothic genre: first, her central protagonist is not a woman; second, she eschews the simple assignment of villainy to a malicious (usually Catholic) male figure. Indeed, as we shall see, the novel revolves around a penchant for violence shared between creator and creature. But in *Frankenstein*, we do find that hallmark of the Gothic – the denial of all overt sexuality – as well as a recurring hint of incest. Walton is alone, writing to his beloved . . . sister;

Victor Frankenstein regards his bride-to-be as his cousin/sister; Victor’s mother marries her father’s best friend, to whom she becomes a devoted and dutiful daughter/wife; even the lovers Felix and Safie meet only in a public, chaste space. But when Elizabeth Lavenza Frankenstein meets her death on her wedding night, the repressed erotic desires in the novel erupt in violence. Indeed, Victor Frankenstein’s close, emotional relationships with males – with Walton, the creature, and Clerval – dominate the novel.

It may be that these charged homosocial relationships are meant to suggest the perversity of denying female sexuality. Indeed, Victor’s ambition to create a literally larger and more beautiful male “object of affection”<sup>7</sup> has been read as a displacement of his repressed homoerotic attraction to the handsome Henry Clerval. The passion and admiration with which Walton regards Victor further extends this homosocial theme to the frame narrative. But the case of Victor Frankenstein, whose main partner is *his own creation*, suggests rather that Mary Shelley offers here a bleak parody of Romantic love, theorized by Percy Shelley as a triumph of the visionary imagination. Specifically, she takes issue with Percy Shelley’s notion (later articulated in the fragment “On Love”) that the lover imagines an idealized form of himself, then sets out to find its “antitype” in the world. That such a strategy pits women against a masculine ideal that is sublimely egotistical is only part of Mary Shelley’s point. For she also suggests that the lover’s idealizations represent a deep-seated fear of female sexual desire. Perhaps the most striking example of this fear lies in Frankenstein’s brutal destruction of the female creature, a potential sexual partner for the creature. After surmising that the female creature might have a will of her own, Frankenstein, “[T]rembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged . . . I almost felt as if I had mangled the living flesh of a human being” (*F* II iii 115, 118). Though this violent scene suggests rape, Frankenstein’s strange identification with the female creature has curious consequences. For as he sets sail to drown the female’s mangled body parts, he too feels torn apart, sea-sick, and nearly drowns. Only by imagining the subjectivity of the female creature does Frankenstein intuit that the original creature is an image of his own desires. For Frankenstein, this knowledge is very nearly fatal.

Like Frankenstein, Walton, too, is driven far afield by heady Romantic ideals of fame and fortune. Certainly Walton’s desire to conquer nature, to tread where no man has gone before, and to tear open a Northeast Passage through the Polar ice to China, is cognate with Frankenstein’s Promethean attempt to steal the principle of life from nature. But unlike Victor, Walton remains answerable to a feminine presence, his sister, and is finally persuaded by his crew to give up his egotistical quest and return to domesticated civility (Margaret Saville). It may well be that Shelley’s elaborate narrative structure

is a defensive gesture, building a series of concentric screens that obscure her originating voice. But one important effect of this structure is to slow down the narrative, allowing time for extended meditations by both the creature and Frankenstein on the nature of morality, the responsibilities of God and parents, and the very principle of life itself. By using three male narrators, Mary Shelley explores in minute detail the outsized, inhuman Romantic ambitions shared by Frankenstein and Walton, and scrutinizes their effects on the creature at the novel's core.<sup>8</sup>

### The texts of *Frankenstein*

If Shelley's frame narrative is a self-censoring gesture, a similar gesture occurred when she gave the manuscript of *Frankenstein* to her husband to edit. Percy Shelley made numerous revisions and corrections to his wife's manuscript, which has recently been analyzed in detail and published both with and without Percy's emendations by Charles E. Robinson.<sup>9</sup> Percy Shelley's editorial revisions often improved the novel by correcting misspellings, using more precise technical terms, and clarifying the narrative and thematic continuity of the text, but on several occasions he misunderstood his wife's intentions and distorted her ideas. I have discussed these revisions at length elsewhere;<sup>10</sup> here let me briefly summarize my findings. By far the greatest number of Percy Shelley's revisions attempt to elevate his wife's prose style into a more Latinate idiom. He typically changed her simple Anglo-Saxon diction and straightforward or colloquial sentence structures into their more complex and stylistically heightened equivalents. He is thus largely responsible for the stilted, ornate, putatively Ciceronian prose style about which so many readers have complained. Her own voice tended to utter a sentimental, rather abstract, and generalized rhetoric, but typically energized this with a brisk stylistic rhythm. Here is Mary Shelley on Frankenstein's fascination with supernatural phenomena:

Nor were these my only visions, the raising of ghosts or devils was also a favorite pursuit and if I never saw any attributed it rather to my own inexperience and mistake, than want of skill in my instructors. (*F Notebooks* 1 23)

And here is Percy Shelley's revision:

Nor were these my only visions. The raising of ghosts or devils was a promise liberally accorded by my favourite authors; the fulfillment of which I most eagerly sought; & if my incantations were always unsuccessful, attributed the failure rather to my own inexperience and mistake, than to a want of skill or fidelity in my instructors. (*F I i* 22)

Percy Shelley consistently preferred more learned, polysyllabic terms, as the following lists indicate:

Mary Shelley’s manuscript	Percy Shelley’s revision
have	possess
wish	desire, purpose
cause	derive their origin from
place	station
time	period
felt	endured
hope	confidence
stay	remain
we were all equal	neither of us possessed the slightest pre-eminence over the other
do not wish to hate you	will not be tempted to set myself in opposition to thee
what to say	what manner to commence the interview

Perhaps more important, Percy Shelley on several occasions distorted the meaning of his wife’s text. He tended to see the creature as more monstrous and less human, changing her word “wretch” to “devil” (*F* III vii 141, line 17) and introducing the description of the creature as “an abortion” (*F* III vii 155, line 6). Conversely, Percy Shelley tended to see Victor Frankenstein more positively than did Mary Shelley. When Frankenstein fails to remain in contact with Elizabeth during his scientific researches at the University of Ingolstadt, Mary Shelley presents his self-justification in these terms: “I wished, as it were, to procrastinate my feelings of affection, untill the great object of my affection was completed” (*F Notebooks* 91). Percy Shelley, anxious to avoid the repetition of the word “affection,” revised this: “I wished, as it were, to procrastinate all that related to my feelings of affections until the great object which swallowed up every habit of my nature should be completed” (*F* I iii 33). Percy Shelley here underestimated his wife’s rhetorical subtlety, for her wording alerts us to the fact that Frankenstein is more sexually attracted to his male creature than he is to his fiancée. Furthermore, in a fine piece of dramatic irony, she anticipates Frankenstein’s failure to feel any affection whatsoever for his newborn, living creature.

Most important, Percy Shelley changed the last line of the novel in a way that potentially alters its meaning. Here is Mary Shelley’s version of Walton’s final view of the creature: “He sprung from the cabin windows as he said this on to an ice raft that lay close to the vessel & pushing him self off he was carried away by the waves and I soon lost sight of him in the darkness &

distance" (*F Notebooks* II 817). Percy Shelley changed this to: "He sprung from the cabin-window, as he said this, upon an ice-raft which lay close to the vessel; he was soon borne away by the waves, & lost in the darkness of distance" (*F* III vii 156). Mary Shelley's version, by suggesting that Walton has only "lost sight of" the creature, preserves the possibility that the creature may still be alive, a threatening reminder of the danger released when men presume to transgress the laws of nature. Percy Shelley's revision, by rendering the creature passive ("borne away" instead of her more assertive "pushing himself away") and by flatly asserting that the creature is "lost in the darkness of distance," provides a comforting reassurance to the reader that the creature is now powerless and completely gone. Beyond accepting Percy Shelley's stylistic changes, particularly of the novel's final sentences, Mary Shelley also allowed him to write the Preface, in which he misleadingly defined the novel's chief concern as "the exhibition of the amiableness of domestic affection, and the excellence of universal virtue" (*F* Preface 6). Why did she do this? Mary looked upon Percy, five years older and already a published novelist and poet, as a literary mentor, who was well qualified to edit and improve her writing. That he felt "authorised to amend" her text (*PBSL* I 553), suggests that he concurred.

In 1831, when Mary Shelley revised *Frankenstein* for republication in Colburn and Bentley's Standard Novel Series, she rewrote it into a significantly different text. Since the first edition is far closer to her originating dream-inspiration, biographical experiences, and early political and philosophical convictions, it has become the text of choice in the classroom and in this *Companion*. Still, we should recognize the important ways in which the 1831 text differs from that of 1818.

By 1831, Mary Shelley had endured countless losses: the deaths of Percy Shelley, of three of her four children, and of Byron; and the betrayal of her closest friends Jane Williams and Thomas Jefferson Hogg, who condemned her for having been an unloving wife. Her journals of the 1820s repeatedly record episodes of depression. She had become convinced that human events are decided not by personal choice or free will but by material forces beyond the control of human agency. As she confessed to Jane Williams Hogg in August, 1827: "The power of Destiny I feel every day pressing more & more on me, & I yield myself a slave to it, in all except my moods of mind" (*L* I 572). Into the 1831 *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley introduced the powerful influence of what she called "Destiny." In the 1818 text, Frankenstein's free will, his capacity for meaningful moral choice, is paramount: he *could* have abandoned his quest for the "principle of life," *could* have cared for his creature, *could* have protected Elizabeth. But in the fatalistic and surprisingly un-Christian vision of the 1831 edition, such moral choices are denied to him.



His decision to study chemistry is now attributed to “Chance – or rather the evil influence, the Angel of Destruction, which asserted omnipotent sway over me” (*F* 1831, iii 94). The deaths of both William Frankenstein and Justine are now represented by Victor as a curse imposed by “inexorable fate” (*F* 1831, viii 135). Not only Victor but also Elizabeth and Justine now attribute their fates to “immutable laws” (*F* 1831, vi 113) or an omnipotent “will” to which mankind must “learn . . . to submit in patience” (*F* 1831, viii 134).

In the 1831 text, Mary Shelley replaces her earlier conception of nature as organic, benevolent, and maternal with a mechanistic view of nature as a mighty juggernaut, impelled by unconscious, amoral force. Since fate or an “imperial Nature” (*F* 1831, x 142) now controls human lives, Victor Frankenstein is decidedly less responsible for his actions; in the best light, he seems almost a tragic hero suffering for an understandable hubris.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, Walton and Clerval, his alter-egos in the novel, are portrayed in ways that reflect more positively on Victor; Walton is more remorseful, while Clerval is no longer a moral touchstone against whom we measure Victor’s failures, but rather an equally ambitious colonial imperialist, eager to work for the East India Company (*F* 1831, vi 116, xix 203).<sup>12</sup>

Crucially, Mary Shelley now undercuts the positive ideal of a loving, egalitarian family, embodied in the De Laceys, which had undergirded the 1818 edition of *Frankenstein*. There she had suggested that if the creature had been mothered by his maker; if he had been accepted into the loving De Lacey family unit, as Safie had been; or if he had been given a female mate and thus enabled to begin his own family, then he might indeed have become the perfected man of whom Victor dreamed. But in the 1831 edition, Shelley portrays the bourgeois family far more negatively, as the site where women are oppressed, silenced, even sacrificed, and racial prejudices are formed.<sup>13</sup> Emblematically, even Ernest Frankenstein, who in 1818 desired to become a farmer, now imagines himself living a soldier’s life (*F* 1831 vi 112).

### A feminist critique of science

Mary Shelley based her myth of the scientist who creates a monster he cannot control upon an extensive understanding of the cutting-edge science of her day. Said to initiate the genre of science fiction, *Frankenstein* is a thought-experiment based directly on the work of three scientists: Humphry Davy, the first President of the Royal Society of Science; Erasmus Darwin, author of *The Botanic Garden, or, Loves of the Plants* (1789, 1791); and Luigi Galvani (and his nephew/assistant). From Davy’s pamphlet *A Discourse, Introductory to a Course of Lectures on Chemistry* (1802) (which Shelley

read in October 1816), and his textbook, *Elements of Chemical Philosophy* (1812), she derived her portrait of Professor Waldman, her use of chemical terminology, and most important, Victor's belief that the "master" chemist is one who attempts, in Davy's words: "to modify and change the beings surrounding him, and by his experiments to interrogate nature with power, not simply as a scholar, passive and seeking only to understand her operations, but rather as a master, active with his own instruments."<sup>14</sup> From Erasmus Darwin, who first theorized the process of botanical and biological evolution through sexual selection, Mary Shelley derived her belief that a good scientist attempts, not to alter the workings of nature, but rather to observe her processes closely in order to understand her. Bearing in mind Darwin's theory that dual-sex propagation is more highly evolved than asexual reproduction, we see the pitfalls of Frankenstein's science. Not only is he a bad scientist for tampering with nature, but he also moves *down* rather than *up* the evolutionary ladder, suturing his creature from both human and animal body parts (he obtains his materials from cemeteries and charnel-houses, from "the dissecting room and the slaughter-house" [*F* 1 iii 32]). Moreover, Frankenstein tries to create a "new species" rather than allowing one to evolve randomly through sexual selection.

From the work of Luigi Galvani, the Italian scientist who attempted to prove that electricity was the life force by reanimating dead frogs with electrical charges, Mary Shelley derived Victor Frankenstein's experiment. In December, 1802, in London, Galvani's nephew Giovanni Aldini attempted to restore to life a recently hanged criminal named Thomas Forster. When volatile alkali was smeared on Forster's nostrils and mouth before the Galvanic electrical stimulus was applied, Aldini reported, "the convulsions appeared to be much increased . . . and extended from the muscles of the head, face, and neck, as far as the deltoid. The effect in this case surpassed our most sanguine expectations," Aldini exulted, concluding that "vitality might, perhaps, have been restored, if many circumstances had not rendered it impossible."<sup>15</sup> Aldini's attempt, widely reported in the British press, is the scientific prototype for Frankenstein's attempt to reanimate a human corpse with the "spark of being" (*F* 1 iv 34).

Through the work of Victor Frankenstein, Mary Shelley mounts a powerful critique of the early modern scientific revolution: of scientific thinking as such, of the psychology of the modern scientist, and of the commitment of science to discover the "objective" truth, whatever the consequences. Inherent in seventeenth-century scientific thought was a ruthless gender politics. As Francis Bacon had announced of the modern scientist, "I am come in very truth leading to you Nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave."<sup>16</sup> Both Waldman and Frankenstein share

this desire to “penetrate into the recesses of nature, and show how she works in her hiding places” (*F* I ii 28). Indeed, Victor’s quest is precisely to usurp from nature the female power of biological reproduction, to become a male womb.

Further, Waldman and Frankenstein share with early modern science the assumption that nature is only matter, particles that can be rearranged at the will of the scientist. They thus defy an earlier Renaissance world-view that perceived nature as a living organism, Dame Nature or Mother Earth, with whom humans were to live in a cooperative, mutually beneficial communion. Frankenstein thus opposes ecology with egotism, with his own yearning to command the worship only a God receives:

Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs. (*F* I iii 32)

But Victor’s scientific experiment, as the world knows by now, does not succeed. This is not merely because the creature turns on him, but also because “Mother Nature” fights back. She destroys Victor’s health (he is frequently sick with both physical and mental diseases and dies of “natural” causes at the age of twenty-five); prevents him from creating a “normal” creature by denying him the maternal instinct or the emotional capacity for empathy; and stops him from engendering his own natural child by diverting his desire for his bride on their wedding night into a desire for revenge. Pointedly, Nature pursues Frankenstein with the very electricity – that “spark of being” with which he animated his creature – that this “modern Prometheus” has stolen from her. As Victor works, lightning flashes around him, storms rage on land and sea, rain falls. Like Percy Shelley in his poem *Mont Blanc*, Mary locates Nature’s sublime, elemental power in the Alpine peaks of Mont Blanc; unlike her husband, though, she explicitly genders this power as female (*F* III iii 134). Ultimately, in *Frankenstein*, as in Percy Shelley’s poem *Alastor, Or The Spirit of Solitude*, the penalty for pursuing Nature to her hiding places is death.

### Problems of perception

My discussion of Mary Shelley’s conception of nature raises two basic philosophical questions, questions explored in depth by the Enlightenment French *philosophes* Rousseau and Voltaire and by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. First, a question of ontology: What, in Shelley’s view, is nature, both the external world and human nature? Put otherwise, what is

*being*? Second, a question of epistemology: how do we know what we know? These are the bristling questions Victor Frankenstein pursues when he asks, “Whence did the principle of life proceed?” (*F* I iii 30). And these are the questions that the creature asks so hauntingly again and again: “Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?” (*F* II vii 86).

As its characters wrestle with these ontological and epistemological questions, Shelley’s novel presents two diametrically opposed answers. On the one hand, the creature, following the French *philosophes* Rousseau and Condorcet, insists that human nature is innately good: “I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend” (*F* II ii 66) and later, “My vices are the children of a forced solitude that I abhor; and my virtues will necessarily arise when I live in communion with an equal” (*F* II ix 100). By contrast, Frankenstein, following a more traditional Christian doctrine of original sin, insists that the creature is innately evil: “Abhorred monster! fiend that thou art! the tortures of hell are too mild a vengeance for thy crimes. Wretched devil!” (*F* II ii 65–66).

Is the creature, frequently referred to as “Being,” innately good or innately evil? This question resonates in the emblematic scene in which the creature first sees himself mirrored in a pond in the woods: “[H]ow was I terrified, when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification” (*F* II iv 76). Here, knowing oneself (cognition) is a matter of seeing oneself reflected in a mirror; in other words, that cognition is always a secondary, derivative perception or image of oneself. The creature is at first “unable to believe” that what he knows (feels, experiences) himself to be is what he sees, but then he becomes “convinced” that he is “in reality” what he sees, a “monster.” Here Shelley follows the eighteenth-century idealist philosopher Berkeley: to be is to be perceived.

But *how* should the creature be perceived? For he enters the novel as the sign of the unknown, the never-before-perceived. How is he to be fit into our culture’s existing codes of signification? All the characters in the novel assume that his outer appearance is a valid index to his inner nature (a phenomenon probed in the many cinematic versions of the novel; see chapters 4 and 5, below). Here, again, Mary Shelley is abreast of the scientific theories of her day, for this semiotics of the face implicitly endorses late eighteenth-century theories that physiognomy and character are closely related. Johann Casper Lavater’s physiognomical theory, for example, held that a person’s inner soul

or moral character produces his or her outer appearance, while Spurzheim and Gall’s phrenological theory held that the contours of the skull determines character and moral nature.

In Shelley’s novel, with only two exceptions, the characters read the creature’s gigantic, yellow-skinned body as monstrous, as *evil*. Victor Frankenstein takes one peremptory look at his animated creation – “I beheld the wretch – the miserable monster whom I had created” (*F* I iv 35) – and flees. When the creature sets forth alone into the world, everyone he encounters assumes that he is a threat. The crippled old man in the hut, the villagers, the rustic whose drowning girlfriend he rescues, Felix, Safie, Agatha, even the innocent William Frankenstein – all immediately read his countenance as that of an “ogre” (*F* II viii 96).

That such readings are arbitrary and perhaps mistaken is clarified when Frankenstein encounters his creature a second time. After denouncing him as a “devil,” a “vile insect,” and an enemy (*F* II ii 65), Frankenstein commands him to “Begone! relieve me from the sight of your detested form.” The creature, having asserted his innate goodness, replies, “‘Thus I relieve thee, my creator,’ . . . and placed his hated hands before my eyes” (*F* II ii 67). By momentarily blinding Victor, the creature cautions us lest our own acts of perception prove faulty. Significantly, the only character who listens to his tale of suffering and then feels sympathy for him, is the blind, old father of the De Lacey.

Shelley’s reader, who listens to the creature’s voice as recorded in Walton’s letters, has a rare opportunity to judge the creature through the ear, not the eye. But is Walton, who only glimpses the creature after listening carefully to both stories, to guide us in this act of judgment? His response to the creature is deeply ambivalent: “Never did I behold a vision so horrible as his face, of such loathsome, yet appalling hideousness. I shut my eyes voluntarily, and endeavoured to recollect what were my duties with regard to this destroyer. I called on him to stay” (*F* III vii 152). Walton feels anger and revulsion, but at the same time – by shutting his eyes – he recalls the creature’s suffering, acknowledges his remorse, and tries to assess his “duties” toward both Victor and his creation. Instead of moving from perplexity to judgment, however, Walton loses sight of him “in the darkness & distance,” as Mary Shelley originally wrote, suggesting not only that the creature is still alive but also that his nature, his *meaning*, remains unfixed, ever available to new interpretations.

Thus, the question remains open: how are we to see or read the creature? From one perspective, Shelley endows her creature with the features of sublimity, a word used to describe the human mind’s confrontation with the

unknowable, the overwhelming, the infinite. As we have already noted, she sets him free among the archetypal landscapes of the sublime: among the Alps, in the frozen wastes of the North Pole. And like power itself, he has superhuman strength. But Shelley's novel outstrips the eighteenth-century idiom of sublimity, powerfully anticipating the insights of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault: human knowledge is the product of invented or linguistically constructed forms or grammars which societies have imposed over time on an unknowable (or, as Derrida would put it, absent) ontological being. In the 1831 Introduction, Mary Shelley linked the creature directly to the unknowable elements of the universe: "Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself" (*F* 1831, Introduction 54). What we call knowledge, truth, or culture are only a collection of "discourses," linguistic readings of what is essentially a "chaos." Since the creature is by definition unique, a "new species," he cannot be known, but once he enters the social realm, he will inevitably be named. In 1826, finding the creature listed on a playbill as "xxxxx," Shelley commented wryly, "this nameless mode of naming the unnameable is rather good" (*L* 1 378; see chapter 4 below).

But Mary Shelley's literary purposes are primarily ethical rather than epistemological; she wants us to understand the *moral* consequences of our ways of reading or seeing the world, of our habit of imposing meanings on that which we cannot truly know. In *Frankenstein*, human beings typically construe the unfamiliar, the abnormal, the unique as dangerous or evil, a construction given form in their language. As Foucault suggested in *Madness and Civilisation*, language is an instrument of power, establishing and policing a myriad of boundaries between "us" and "them," in a desperate effort to protect human societies from the terrors of the unknown.

What we find in Shelley's novel is that such linguistic definitions of other beings as "monsters" create the very evils that they imagine. It is significant in this context that the creature is yellow-skinned and black-lipped (*F* 1 iv 34). These features are usually read either as a marker of disease (the creature may have jaundice or yellow fever), of his liminal status between the living and the dead (he is the color of a "mummy" [*F* III vii 152] or one of the undead), or of his anatomical incompleteness. But it is also a marker of his racial otherness; as Walton observes, the creature is not a European but a "savage inhabitant" of some "undiscovered island" north of the "wilds of Russia and Tartary" (*F* I, Letter iv 13). And to read such a member of another race as "savage" or monstrous is to participate in the cultural production of racist stereotypes.

### Doubling Frankenstein

Mary Shelley suggests that if we concur with her characters in reading the creature as a monster, then we write the creature as a monster and become ourselves the authors of evil; as the poet William Blake put it, “we become what we behold.” In her novel, Victor Frankenstein literally becomes the monster he linguistically constructs: “I considered the being whom I had cast among mankind . . . nearly in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave” (*F* I vi 49). This identification of Victor with his creature is textually reinforced by the repeated association of both Victor and his creature with both Milton’s Satan (*F* III vii 146; II ii 66) and his fallen Adam (*F* III v 131; II ii 66). Here, too, Mary Shelley’s response to a precursor is distinctive. Whereas Blake, Byron, and Shelley revised Milton’s epic by aligning themselves with the revolutionary energies of Satan, Mary Shelley explores the ambiguities of the fallen condition, whether human or Satanic.

Victor and his creature are virtually fused into one being, almost one consciousness, during their final race across the icy wastes of the North Pole. Here, the hunter becomes the hunted, the pursued the pursuer. The creature leaves food for the pursuing Victor so that they can finally reunite. And when each boards Walton’s ship, each articulates the same feelings of intermingled revenge, remorse, and despair. As the creature observes to the corpse of Victor, in Shelley’s manuscript, “Miserable as you were my wretchedness is superior to yours for remorse is the bitter sting that rankles in my wounds & tortures me to madness” (*F Notebooks* II 817). Victor has become his creature, his creature has become his maker; they are each other’s double. Hence naming the creature “Frankenstein” – as popular folklore would have it – uncovers a profound truth within the novel’s narrative.

Perhaps Mary Shelley’s most profound critique of the divine Romantic imagination celebrated by Percy Shelley, Byron, Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge lies in her conviction that an unfettered imagination is more likely to create forms based on fear than on love. As the rationalist Theseus warns in Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the poet, like the lover and the lunatic, sees “more devils than vast hell can hold” or in the night, “imagining some fear,” supposes every bush a bear. Thus, Shelley’s strikingly modern, even post-modern, answer to the philosophical questions raised in *Frankenstein* is both a radical skepticism and a categorical moral imperative. When we write the unfamiliar as monstrous, we literally create the evil, the injustice, the racism, sexism, and class prejudice, that we arbitrarily imagine. Throughout the first edition of her novel, Shelley implicitly endorses a redemptive alternative to Frankenstein’s egotistical attempt to penetrate and manipulate nature. This is an ethic of care that would sympathize with and

protect all living beings, that would live in beneficial cooperation with nature, and that would bring about social reform not through a violent French-style revolution but rather through peaceful, gradual evolution. Such an ideal flickers in the happy domesticity of the loving De Lacey family, where Felix (whose name means happiness) and Agatha (whose name means goodness) eagerly embrace the racial other, the Turkish/Christian Safie (whose name means wisdom). And when the De Laceys flee in horror from the gift-bearing, beneficent Creature, they leave the reader stranded in the terrifying nightmare of Victor Frankenstein's single-minded, egotistical attempt to steal the secrets of nature. But, as the chapters that follow will suggest, the survival of Frankenstein's creature, in story, film, myth, and literary criticism opens the way for ever new, possibly more constructive readings of Shelley's "monster."

## NOTES

- 1 Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 91–99. For later feminist readings of *Frankenstein*, see Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York: Methuen, 1988).
- 2 Unless otherwise noted, all references are to the 1818 edition of *Frankenstein*.
- 3 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 45–92.
- 4 Barbara Johnson, "My Monster/My Self," *Diacritics* 12.2 (1982), 7.
- 5 See Mellor, *Mary Shelley*, pp. 54–55; this date has since been confirmed by Charles Robinson, editor of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *The Frankenstein Notebooks, A Facsimile Edition of Mary Shelley's Manuscript Novel, 1816–17* (New York: Garland, 1996), l xlv–lxvi.
- 6 David Punter, *The Literature of Terror* (London: Longman, 1980; rpt. 1996); see esp. pp. 183–88.
- 7 In Shelley's manuscript, Victor Frankenstein refers to his creature as "the great object of my affection"; see discussion below.
- 8 See Richard J. Dunn, "Narrative Distance in *Frankenstein*," *Studies in the Novel* 6 (1974), 408–17.
- 9 See Robinson, *Frankenstein Notebooks*, throughout. Subsequent references to the *Notebooks* appear in parentheses.
- 10 See Mellor, *Mary Shelley*, pp. 57–69; reprinted in part in *F* 1818 160–66.
- 11 Working with the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, Robert Kiely interprets Victor Frankenstein as a tragic hero in *The Romantic Novel in England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972).
- 12 See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985), 243–61; and Joseph W. Lew, "The Deceptive Other: Mary Shelley's Critique of Orientalism in *Frankenstein*," *SiR* 30.2 (1991), 255–83.
- 13 On the positive portrayal of the bourgeois nuclear family in the 1818 edition of *Frankenstein*, see Mellor, *Mary Shelley*, pp. 1–37, 117–18, 125–26, and throughout; on the more negative view of the nuclear family represented in the 1831



- edition, see Kate Ferguson Ellis, “Monsters in the Garden: Mary Shelley and the Bourgeois Family,” *EF* 123–42, and Adam Komisaruk, “‘So Guided by a Silken Cord’: *Frankenstein*’s Family Values,” *SiR* 38.3 (1999), 409–41.
- 14 Sir Humphry Davy, *A Discourse, Introductory to A Course of Lectures on Chemistry* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1802), p. 16.
- 15 Giovanni Aldini, *An Account of the Late Improvements in Galvanism* (London: Cuthell and Martin, and J. Murray, 1803), p. 54.
- 16 Francis Bacon, “‘Temporis Partus Masculus’: An Untranslated Writing of Francis Bacon,” trans. Benjamin Farrington, *Centaurus* 1 (1951), 197.