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My Hideous Progeny: Mary Shelley and the Feminization of Romanticism

TO MOST OF her acquaintances, the mature Mary Shelley was quite simply a conundrum. “Your writings and your manner are not in accordance,” Lord Dillion observed in 1829.

I should have thought of you—if I had only read you—that you were a sort of my Sybil, outpouringly enthusiastic, rather indiscreet, and even extravagant; but you are cool, quiet, and feminine to the last degree—I mean in delicacy of manner and expression. Explain this to me.¹

Leigh Hunt, who had known Shelley longer than most of her new London set, found her friends’ confusion amusing enough to rhyme:

And Shelley, four-famed—for her parents, her lord,
 And the poor lone impossible monster
 abhorred.
 (So sleek and so smiling she came, people
 stared,
 To think such fair clay should so darkly have
 dared.)²

The puzzle Shelley presented to her contemporaries is well worth our consideration, for what seems to suggest a simple discrepancy between art and life actually points to a lifetime of self-division, the result of one woman’s attempt to conform simultaneously to two conflicting prescriptive models of behavior. On the one hand, both as the daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft and as the lover and then wife of Percy Shelley, Mary was encouraged from her youth to fulfill the Romantic model of the artist, to prove herself by means of her pen and her imagination. “In our family,” Mary’s stepsister Claire Clairmont once wryly remarked, “if you cannot write an epic poem or novel, that by its originality knocks all other

novels on the head, you are a despicable creature, not worth acknowledging” (Marshall, II, 248). On the other hand, this pressure to be “original” was contradicted by the more prevalent social expectations that a woman conform to the conventional feminine model of propriety, that she be self-effacing and supportive, devoted to a family rather than to a career. Caught between these two models, Shelley developed a pervasive personal and artistic ambivalence toward feminine self-assertion. Each of her six novels reflects this ambivalence to a greater or lesser degree; they are all riddled with competing tendencies because they simultaneously fulfill and punish her desire for self-expression. Because her works demonstrate the difficulties that the conflicting expectations of this transitional period posed for a woman writer, Mary Shelley emerges as an important figure, even though she never fully achieved the personal or the aesthetic self-confidence necessary to integrate her imaginative efforts.

The sources and the extent of Shelley’s ambivalence are vividly set out in the two editions of her most famous novel, *Frankenstein*. The first edition, published in 1818, when Mary was just twenty and not yet married, is as bold and original a work as the novelist ever conceived. But even though the 1818 *Frankenstein* addresses an undeniably unorthodox subject, it does so with conservative reservations, which have been largely overlooked by both nineteenth- and twentieth-century commentators. For in the course of her unladylike metaphysical speculations, Shelley explodes the foundations of Romantic optimism by demonstrating that the egotistical energies necessary to self-assertion—energies that appear to her to be at the heart of the Romantic model of the imagination—inevitably imperil the self-denying energies of love. To accommodate this reservation, which

implicitly indicts all artistic endeavors as well as more insidious forms of egotism, Shelley essentially feminizes Romantic aesthetics, deriving from her contemporaries' theories strategies that enable her to fulfill her desire for self-expression in an indirect, self-effacing, and therefore acceptable manner. But in the 1831 edition of her youthful production, Shelley finds even this qualified self-assertion too audacious. Despite her claims to "have changed no portion of the story, nor introduced any new ideas or circumstances,"³ the introduction she added to the third edition and the revisions she made in the text suggest that by 1831 Shelley wants to apologize for her adolescent audacity, to explain that she, like Frankenstein, is terrified by the product of what she now considers a "frightful transgression." Even in 1831, however, Shelley does not fully accept responsibility for her earlier "crime," nor does she wholly renounce the artistic enterprise she claims to find so blasphemous. For by dramatizing herself—just as she does the 1831 Frankenstein—as the victim of forces beyond her control, she elevates the dilemma of the female artist to the status of myth and sanctions the very self-expression she professes to regret. The reversals within each of the texts reveal the contradictions of a painfully self-divided desire; taken together, the two editions of *Frankenstein* provide a case study in the tensions inherent in the feminine adaptation of the Romantic "egotistical sublime."

Even though *Frankenstein's* first reviewers praised the work's power and stylistic vigor, they sharply criticized the unknown novelist's failure to moralize about her startling, even blasphemous subject. In this respect, the verdict of the *Quarterly Review* is typical:

Our taste and our judgment alike revolt at this kind of writing, and the greater the ability with which it may be executed the worse it is—it inculcates no lesson of conduct, manners, or morality; it cannot mend, and will not even amuse its readers, unless their taste have been deplorably vitiated—it fatigues the feelings without interesting the understanding; it gratuitously harasses the heart, and only adds to the store, already too great, of painful sensations.⁴

Presumably because a refusal to moralize was unthinkable for a woman, most critics automatically assumed the author of *Frankenstein* to be

a man—no doubt a "follower of Godwin," according to *Blackwood's*; possibly even Percy Shelley himself, thought the *Edinburgh Magazine* (Grylls, p. 315). But these reviewers leaped too hastily to conclusions, not only about the sex of the young writer but also about the author's supposed defiance of conventional morality. For while the obvious unorthodoxy of *Frankenstein's* subject, coupled with its unusual narrative strategy, seems to mock propriety, close attention to the scientist's story reveals a deeply critical attitude toward the egotism Mary Shelley read in the works of her male contemporaries. Like many other Romantic artists, Shelley focuses on the theme of Promethean desire, which has implications both for the development of culture and for the individual creative act. But besides the beneficial results imagined by Coleridge, Wordsworth, Byron, and Percy Shelley, the gifts Mary Shelley's "modern Prometheus" brings threaten to destroy society and the blasphemous artist as well.⁵

Like many male Romantics, Shelley discusses desire within a paradigm of individual maturation: *Frankenstein* is Shelley's version of that process of identity formation Keats called "soul-making." In the 1818 text, Shelley's model of maturation begins with a realistic depiction of Lockean psychology; young Victor is a tabula rasa whose character is formed by circumstantial influences. The son of loving, protective parents, the companion of affectionate friends, Frankenstein soon finds the harmony of his childhood violated by what he calls a "predilection" for natural philosophy. Yet Frankenstein locates the origin of this inclination not in his innate disposition but in a single childhood accident—the chance discovery of a volume of Cornelius Agrippa's occult speculations. The "fatal impulse" this volume sparks is then kindled into passionate enthusiasm by other accidents: Victor's father neglects to explain Agrippa's obsolescence, a discussion provoked by a bolt of lightning explodes Victor's belief in the occult, and "some accident" prevents Frankenstein from attending lectures on natural philosophy. Left with a craving for knowledge but no reliable guide to direct it, he is able to keep his curiosity within bounds only through the "mutual affection" of his domestic circle.

In this dramatization of Victor Frankenstein's

childhood, Shelley fuses mechanistic psychological theories of the origin and development of character with the more organic theories generally associated with the Romantics. Like most contemporary Lockean philosophers, she asserts that circumstances arouse and direct an individual's capacity for imaginative activity; the inclination or predilection thus formed then constitutes the basis of identity.⁶ But when Shelley combines this model with the notion (implied by the poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and Percy Shelley) that an individual's desire, once set in motion, has its own impetus and logic, she comes up with a model of maturation that contradicts the optimism of both mechanists and organicists. For Shelley characterizes innate desire not as neutral or benevolent but as quintessentially egotistical. Desire is for Shelley a drive that can and must be regulated—specifically, by the give-and-take of domestic relationships. If it is aroused and not controlled, it will project itself into the natural world, becoming voracious in its search for objects to conquer and consume. This principle, which partakes of both mechanistic and organic models, constitutes the major dynamic of *Frankenstein's* plot. As long as domestic relationships govern one's energy, desire will turn outward as love. But when the individual loses or leaves the regulating influence of relationship, desire always threatens to turn back on itself, to "mark" all external objects as its own and to degenerate into "gloomy and narrow reflections upon self" (p. 32).

Shelley's exposition of the degeneration of incipient desire into full-fledged egotism begins when Frankenstein leaves his childhood home. At the University of Ingolstadt he is alone, left to "form [his] own friends, and be [his] own protector" (p. 40). Cut loose from domestic regulations, the youth exercises a bold confidence in his innate impulses and capacities; he believes that his desire to conquer death through science is fundamentally unselfish and that he can be his own guardian. But, as Mary Shelley ruthlessly proves, both these comforting assumptions are only tricks by which his desire—or, as Frankenstein calls it, his "ardent imagination"—blinds him to its own essential "self-devotion." The course of Frankenstein's decline suggests, in fact, that in the absence of social regulation the formation of the ego is primarily

influenced by the imagination's longing to deny fundamental human limitations—in particular, the body's determinate bondage to nature and to death. Frankenstein "penetrate[s] into the recesses of nature" in search of the secret of life, but what he discovers in the "vaults and charnel houses" is the "natural decay and corruption of the human body." Death is the initial and obsessive focus of the imagination, just as it will be, through the agency of the monster, its final product. But Frankenstein's imagination, swollen with self-importance, refuses to acknowledge that his own body is a part of this chain of natural processes; Victor rationalizes his absorption in "corruption and waste" as necessary to the intellectual mastery of death, and he plots his perpetuity even as he plans the creature that will express and eventually put an end to his egotism.

Frankenstein's fatal impulse also has profound social consequences, for the vanity that convinces the scientist of the benevolence and power of his imagination is one expression of the essential, egotistical drive to assert and extend the self—to deny not only one's own mortality but also, to use Kant's phrase, the otherness of others. Thus Frankenstein's love for his family is the first victim of his growing obsession. His filial affection is displaced by "supernatural enthusiasm": "I wished, as it were, to procrastinate all that related to my feelings of affection until the great object, which swallowed up every habit of my nature, should be completed" (p. 50). He isolates himself in a "solitary chamber," refuses to write even to his fiancée, Elizabeth, and grows "insensible to the charms of nature." "I became as timid as a love-sick girl," Frankenstein realizes in retrospect, "and alternate tremor and passionate ardour took the place of wholesome sensation and regulated ambition" (p. 51).

In criticizing the indulged imagination, Mary Shelley is more concerned with this antisocial dimension than with any metaphysical implications. In Chapter v, for example, at the grotesque heart of her story, she elaborates the significance of Frankenstein's self-absorption primarily in terms of his social relationships. After animating the monster, the product and symbol of self-serving desire, the exhausted scientist is immediately confronted with a dream

explication of his crime: having denied domestic relationships by indulging his selfish passions, he has, in effect, murdered domestic tranquillity:

I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. (p. 53)

Lover and mother, the presiding female guardians of Frankenstein's "secluded and domestic" youth, are conflated in this tableau of the enthusiast's guilt. Only now, when Frankenstein starts from his sleep to find the misshapen creature hanging over his bed (as Frankenstein will later hang over Elizabeth's), does he recognize his desire for what it really is—a monstrous urge, alien and threatening to all human intercourse.

In effect, animating the monster completes and liberates Frankenstein's egotism, for his indescribable experiment explicitly objectifies desire. Paradoxically, in this incident Shelley simultaneously literalizes the ego's destructiveness and sets in motion the more figurative, symbolic character of the monster. The significance of this event for the monster I discuss below; for Frankenstein, this moment, which cuts short his process of maturation, has the dual effect of initiating self-consciousness and, tragically, perfecting his alienation. Briefly "restored to life" by his childhood friend Clerval, Frankenstein rejects that "selfish pursuit [which] had cramped and narrowed" him and returns his desire to its proper objects, his "beloved friends." But ironically, the very gesture that disciplines his desire has already destroyed the possibility of establishing relationships with his loved ones. Although liberating the monster allows Frankenstein to see that personal fulfillment results from self-denial rather than from self-assertion, that action also condemns him to perpetual isolation and, therefore, to permanent incompleteness.

This fatal paradox, the heart of Mary Shelley's waking nightmare, gives a particularly feminine twist to one important Romantic myth of human maturation through self-consciousness. In that process, which Wordsworth describes

most extensively in *The Prelude*, the child's innate desire, stirred and nurtured by the mother's love, is soon directed outward toward the natural world. Desire takes this aggressive turn because in maternal love and in the receptivity this love cultivates "there exists / A virtue which irradiates and exalts / All objects through all intercourse of sense" (1805 *Prelude* II.258–60). Because of a growing confidence in the beneficence of the questing imagination and nature's generous response, the child is able to effect a radical break with the mother without suffering irretrievable loss:

No outcast he, bewildered and depressed:
 Along his infant veins are interfused
 The gravitation and the filial bond
 Of Nature that connect him with the world.
 (II.261–64)

The heightened images of the self cast back from nature then help the child develop a sense of independent identity and power.

In marked contrast, Mary Shelley distrusts both the imagination *and* the natural world. The imagination, as it is depicted in Frankenstein's original transgression, is incapable of projecting an irradiating virtue, for in aiding and abetting the ego the imagination carries death-dealing, selfish desire into the domestic arena. By extension, nature is also suspect because, as the avatar of death, it lacks altogether the humane, moral aspect institutionalized in the family and society. Thus Mary Shelley does not depict numerous natural theaters into which individuals can project their growing desires and from which affirmative echoes will hasten maturation. Instead, she continues to dramatize personal fulfillment strictly in terms of the child's original domestic harmony, with the absent mother being replaced by the closest female equivalent; ideally, Elizabeth would link Frankenstein's maturity to his youth, just as Mrs. Saville would anchor the mariner Walton. Ideally, in other words, the beloved object would be sought and found only within the comforting confines of preexistent domestic relationships. In this model, Shelley therefore ties the formation of personal identity to self-denial rather than to self-assertion, to a sort of perpetual childhood, entailing relational self-definition and dependence, rather

than to the Wordsworthian model of adulthood, which involves self-confidence, freedom, and faith in the individualistic imaginative act.

The remainder of Frankenstein's narrative proves beyond a doubt that his original transgression culminates not in maturity but in death. The monster is simply the agent that carries out Frankenstein's desire: just as Frankenstein figuratively denied his family, so the monster literally destroys Frankenstein's domestic relationships, blighting both the memory and the hope of familial harmony with the "black mark" of its murderous hand. William Frankenstein, Justine Moritz, Henry Clerval, even Elizabeth Lavenza are, as it were, *possessed* by this creature, but, as Frankenstein knows all too well, its victims are by extension his own: Justine is *his* "unhappy victim" (p. 80); *he* has murdered Clerval (p. 174); and the creature consummates *his* deadly desire on "*its* bridal bier" (p. 193).

For Mary Shelley, indulging desire leads to this massacre of social relationships because of the kinship she perceives between essential human nature and the ghastly essence of the natural world. Shelley most graphically describes nature's fateful fraternity with death in the setting for the final action of *Frankenstein*, the random upheavals of the glacial ice floes. Like Percy Shelley's version of this scene in "Mont Blanc,"⁷ Mary Shelley's image suggests an inhumane, icy nature, "terrifically desolate," strewn with uprooted and broken trees and partially shrouded by impenetrable mists. Yet, unlike her future husband, Mary Shelley does not temper this presentation of nature by claiming for the imagination a saving supremacy ("And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, / If to the human mind's imaginings / Silence and solitude were vacancy?" ["Mont Blanc," ll. 142–44]). In her inhospitable world, the most likely answer to a human cry is an avalanche, and all momentary social contact is severed by the breaking up of the icy ground. These fields of ice, deadly to individuals like Frankenstein, provide a fitting home only for essential, uncivilized human nature—for the monster, who can achieve no community with those whose energy culture has regulated and refined into "sensitivity."

Shelley repeatedly stresses the fatal kinship of

the imagination, nature, and death by the tropes of natural violence that describe human desires. Passion is like nature internalized, as even Frankenstein knows:

When I would account to myself for the birth of that passion, which afterwards ruled my destiny, I find it arise, like a mountain river, from ignoble and almost forgotten sources; but, swelling as it proceeded, it became the torrent which, in its course, has swept away all my hopes and joys. (p. 32)

Ambition drives Frankenstein "like a hurricane" as he engineers the monster (p. 49), and after he liberates it he is a "blasted tree," "utterly destroyed" by a lightning blast to his soul. Thus Shelley uses metaphor to anticipate the pattern literalized by the monster. *Like* forces in the natural world, Frankenstein's unregulated desire gathers strength until it erupts in the monster's creation; then the creature actualizes, externalizes the pattern of nature—human nature and the natural world now explicitly combined—with a power that destroys all society. The pattern inherent in the natural world and figuratively ascribed to human beings becomes, in other words, through the monster, Frankenstein's "fate" or "destiny."

The individual's determinate relationship to nature is further complicated, as we now know, by the yearning to deny that kinship. In retrospect, Frankenstein knows that the winds will more likely bring a storm than calm, but in the blindness of his original optimism, he believes that nature is hospitable, that it offers an "ennobling interchange" to console and elevate the soul. Still trusting himself and the natural world, Frankenstein cries out with "something like joy" to the spirit of the Alps, as if it were a compassionate, as well as a natural, parent; "Wandering spirits . . . allow me this faint happiness, or take me, as your companion, away from the joys of life." But Frankenstein's belief in natural benevolence, like his earlier confidence in the benevolence of his desire, proves a trick of the wishful imagination. His request is answered by the true spirit of this and every place untamed by social conventions—the "superhuman," "unearthly" monster. Lulled once more by his desiring imagination, Frankenstein again fails to recognize the character of his bond with nature until that

bond stands before him, incarnate in the monster.

To understand why Mary Shelley's first readers did not fully appreciate what seems in comparison to Romantic optimism to be an unmistakable critique of the imagination, we must turn to the monster's narrative. For Shelley's decision to divide the novel into a series of first-person narratives instead of employing a single perspective, whether first-person or omniscient, effectively qualifies her judgment of egotism. Because the monster, in particular, voices its own pain, the reader is asked to participate not only in Frankenstein's pathetic desire for innate and natural benevolence but also in the agonizing repercussions of this wishful desire.

In the monster's narrative, Shelley both recapitulates Frankenstein's story and, ingeniously, completes it. Both beings are influenced by external circumstances that arouse and then direct their desire for knowledge, and both ardent quests lead only to the terrible realization of essential grotesqueness. But unlike Frankenstein, the monster is denied the luxury of an original domestic harmony. The monster is "made," not born; as the product of the unnatural coupling of nature and the imagination, it is trapped in the vortex of death that characterizes both. Moreover, as the product, then the agent, of Frankenstein's egotism, the monster is merely a link in the symbolic "series" of Frankenstein's "self-devoted being," not a member of a natural family.⁸ The creature cannot influence its own destiny, because, as the embodiment of Frankenstein's indulged desire and nature's essence, it *is* destiny. Yet the triumph of Shelley's presentation of this symbolic creature rests in her decision to dramatize in *it*, not in Frankenstein, the psychological dimension of Frankenstein's fall, the personal anguish that attends the egotist's self-deception. Given the nobler aspirations but not the power of a human being, the monster, as it were, struggles futilely to deny its symbolic status and the starkness of its literalized domain, to break free into the realistic frame that Frankenstein occupies. Like Frankenstein, the creature believes that it is innately benevolent and that it can deny its determinate origins. But because the monster

is only a symbolic projection of Frankenstein's imagination, it lacks the capacity for self-determination. Although, unlike Frankenstein, it recognizes and longs to overcome its definitive monstrosity, the creature is unable to disguise its essential being and thus is denied the sympathy it can still imagine. Therefore the monster's story, which Shelley's contemporaries took to be a Godwinian critique of social injustice, becomes a symbolic extension of her comment on the ego's monstrosity, an inside glimpse of the pathos of the human condition, and—not incidentally—an indirect dramatization of the misshapen monster Shelley feared feminine metaphysics to be.

For the monster, self-consciousness comes with brutal speed, for recognition depends not on an act of transgression but only on literal self-perception. An old man's terror, a pool of water, a child's fear are all nature's mirrors, returning the monster repeatedly to its grotesque self, "a figure hideously deformed and loathsome . . . a monster, a blot upon the earth" (pp. 115–16). When the creature discovers its true origin—not in the social texts it learns to read but in its maker's notebooks—it can no longer deny the absolute "horror" of its being, the monstrous singularity of egotism: "the minutest description of my odious and loathsome person is given, in language which painted your own horrors, and rendered mine ineffaceable" (p. 126). From this moment on, the monster's attempts to contradict its nature are as desperate as they are futile. In its most elaborate effort, the creature hides in a womblike hovel, as if it can be born again into culture by aping the motions of the family it watches. Although the monster tries to disguise its true nature by confronting only the blind old father, De Lacey's children return and recognize its "ineffaceable" monstrosity and what it signifies. Their violent reaction, the rejection by its "adopted family," at last precipitates the monster's innate nature; abandoning man's "godlike science"—the language of society so diligently learned—for its natural tongue—the nonsignifying "fearful howlings" of beasts—the monster embarks on its systematic destruction of domestic harmony. The creature makes one final attempt to form a new society, but when Frankenstein refuses to create a female monster, the monster is condemned, like his maker, to a sin-

gle bond of hatred. After Frankenstein's death, the creature disappears into the darkness of the novel's end, vowing to build its own funeral pyre, for it is as immune to human justice as it was excluded from human love.

The monster carries with it the guilt and alienation that attend Frankenstein's self-assertion; yet, by having the monster itself realistically detail the stages by which it is driven to act out its symbolic nature, Shelley compels the reader to identify with the creature's anguish and frustration. The first-person, symbolic presentation of the monster within a literalized landscape thus qualifies Shelley's condemnation of self-assertion—so effectively, in fact, that generations of critics and cinematographers have awarded the creature its maker's name and place. For Mary Shelley, displacing the emotional dimension of Frankenstein's transgression onto the essentially powerless monster is primarily a means of *indirectly* dramatizing her emotional investment in Frankenstein's creative act—and her profound ambivalence toward it. The degree of pathos in the monster's cry suggests that Shelley most unequivocally identifies with the product, and the price, of Frankenstein's transgression: the objectified ego, helpless and alone. Perhaps, as we will see when we discuss her 1831 introduction, the monster's condition seemed to Shelley the appropriate fate for the self-assertive, "masculine," and therefore monstrous female artist.

Shelley's depiction of the monster allows for indirection because a symbol is able to accommodate different, even contradictory meanings. Although in an important sense Frankenstein's imagination loses potential semantic richness by being literalized in the monster (e.g., its possibilities of transcendent power or beneficence), this narrative strategy does allow Shelley to express her sympathy for the creative enterprise without explicitly retracting her earlier judgment of it. In other words, using symbolism at this point in the narrative enables Shelley to express two opinions, to record precisely her own divided attitude toward Frankenstein's imaginative act.

We can best understand the function symbolism plays for Mary Shelley by contrasting her use of it with Percy Shelley's significantly different description of the symbolic in his preface to the 1818 *Frankenstein*. In his well-known justifi-

cation for the central scene, Percy stresses not the ambivalence of the symbol but its comprehensiveness and its power: "However impossible as a physical fact, [this incident] affords a point of view to the imagination for the delineating of human passions more comprehensive and commanding than any which the ordinary relations of existing events can yield" (p. 6). Although we know from the Shelleys' letters and from the surviving manuscript of *Frankenstein* that Percy was instrumental in promoting, and even in revising, the text,⁹ Mary did not uncritically or wholeheartedly embrace the aesthetic rationale by which Percy justified this self-confident use of symbolism or the artistic enterprise of which it is only a part. In fact, Mary Shelley feminizes Percy's version of the Romantic aesthetic, using her lover's theories to justify the very strategies that enabled her to find an acceptable, non-assertive voice.

Percy Shelley defended his aesthetic doctrines, like his political and religious beliefs, with a conviction Mary later called a "resolution firm to martyrdom."¹⁰ Scornful of public opinion, he maintains in his "Defence of Poetry" (1821) that a true poet may be judged only by legitimate peers, a jury "impanelled by Time from the selectest of the wise of many generations." Society's mistaken accusation of artistic immorality, Percy explains, rests on "a misconception of the manner in which poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man." According to Percy, the audience's relationship to poetry is based not on reason but on the imagination; true poetry encourages not imitation or judgment but participation. It strengthens the moral sense because it exercises and enlarges the capacity for sympathetic identification, that is, for relationship. Following Plato, Percy declares that the primary reflex of the moral imagination is the outward gesture of love:

The great secret of morals is Love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of

moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause.¹¹

Each of Percy Shelley's aesthetic doctrines comes to rest on this model of the imagination as an innately moral, capacious faculty. Because the imagination, if unrestrained, naturally supersedes relative morals (and in so doing compensates for the inhumaneness of the natural world), poets should not discipline their efforts according to a particular society's conceptions of right and wrong. Because the imagination tends to extend itself, through sympathy, to truth, poets should simply depict examples of truth, thus drawing their readers into a relationship that simultaneously feeds and stimulates the human appetite for "thoughts of ever new delight."

This model of the artwork as an arena for relationships is the only aspect of Percy's aesthetics that Mary Shelley adopts without reservation. The notion that the artist establishes and nurtures relationships with an audience is compatible not only with the valorization of relationship we have already seen in *Frankenstein* but with society's insistence that a woman achieve her identity through and within relationships. For, unlike her defiant lover, Mary was not immune to public opinion or oblivious to conventional propriety. Percy's defiance of society was based on his confidence in the innate morality of the imagination, an assumption Mary did not share, and it resulted in a bold self-confidence that would appear, in a woman, to border on unconscionable self-assertion. In *Frankenstein*, therefore, Mary Shelley harnesses Percy's aesthetic theories to her own more conservative assumptions and thus fundamentally alters the implications of his ideas. By adopting a narrative strategy that insists on the reader's sympathetic engagement with even the monstrous part of her self, she simultaneously satisfies Percy's standards for true art and her own conflicting needs for self-assertion and social acceptance. The three-part narrative structure enables her to establish her role as an artist through a series of relationships rather than through an act of self-assertion; and because she does not limit herself to a single perspective she also avoids taking responsibility for any definitive position on what

is undeniably an unladylike subject. In other words, the narrative strategy, like the symbolic presentation of the monster, permits Mary to express and efface herself at the same time.

Before turning to the 1831 revisions we must examine the last of the three narrators of *Frankenstein*, for if the scientist and the monster lure the reader ever deeper into the heart of desire, Robert Walton reminds us that Frankenstein's abortive enthusiasm is *not* the only possible outcome of adolescence. Walton's epistolary journal contains and effectively mediates the voices of the other two narrators, and so he may be said to have the last, if not the definitive, word. Like Henry Clerval and Felix De Lacey, the mariner Walton provides an example of the domesticated man, whose altruism figures as an alternative to Frankenstein's antisocial ambition. But because Walton bears closer affinities to his adopted friend than does either Clerval or De Lacey, his ability to elevate concern for others above selfish desire stands as Shelley's most explicit critique of Frankenstein's imaginative self-indulgence.

Like Frankenstein, Robert Walton is from his youth motivated by an obsession that scorns the empirical, superficial understanding of nature. Despite contrary facts, Walton believes that the North Pole is a "region of beauty and delight" (p. 9) and longs to "sate [his] ardent curiosity" by penetrating its secrets. Walton's ambition, like Frankenstein's, masquerades as a desire to benefit society, although it too is really only the egotist's desire for "glory." Whereas Frankenstein transgresses metaphysical boundaries in his experiments, Walton defies geographical limitations in his exploration, but both men transgress against their domestic relationships to indulge their desires. Walton's only living relative is Margaret Saville, the sister with whom he initially corresponds, but as Walton's ship sails farther into the wastes of ice, his narrative becomes nearly as self-contained as Frankenstein's monologue; the outward gesture of writing to another gradually gives way to the more "self-devoted" habit of keeping a journal, of addressing a letter to his future self.

Despite the similarities in the aspirations of the two men, Walton's ambition remains only an

embryonic version of Frankenstein's murderous egotism, for Walton does not allow his obsession to destroy relationships. Walton's crucial distinction is his willingness to deny his desire when it jeopardizes his social responsibilities or his relational identity. Walton constantly thinks of himself in terms of relationships: he is from his childhood an "affectionate brother," and he conceives of maturity as an extension of the regulating influence of others. The "evil" Walton laments is not the mortality of the individual (as death was the "most irreparable evil" to Frankenstein) but the individual's innate insufficiency:

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 have no friend, Margaret: when I am glowing with the enthusiasm of success, there will be none to participate my joy. . . . I desire the company of a man who could sympathize with me; whose eyes would reply to mine. . . . My day dreams are . . . extended and magnificent; but they want (as the painters call it) *keeping*; and I greatly need a friend who would have sense enough not to despise me as romantic, and affection enough for me to endeavour to regulate my mind. (pp. 13–14)

When Walton's ship rescues the "wretched" Frankenstein from the frozen ocean, Walton immediately begins to "love him as a brother" (p. 22), to thaw his icy silence, to nurse him back to intermittent sympathy and generosity. But by this time, Frankenstein's ambition has already contracted his social passions into hatred and a craving for revenge ("I—I have lost every thing," Frankenstein cries, "and cannot begin life anew" [p. 23]). In contrast, Walton is still capable of redirecting his involuted ambition outward into self-denying love, for Walton has never permitted his desire to escape completely the regulating influence of social relationships. Even though he had once written to his sister that his resolution was "as fixed as fate," in that same early letter he assured her that his concern for others would always dwarf his ambition (p. 15). In the end, of course, Walton capitulates to the pleas of his sailors—his family of the sea—and agrees to return south, to safety and civilization. Walton "kill[s] no albatross"; he realizes that denying his ambition will be painful, even humiliating, but he does not commit the anti-

social crime of indulging his egotistic curiosity. Finally, Walton's journal even opens outward again and addresses Margaret Saville directly (p. 206). Walton's letters, as the dominant chain of all the narrations, preserve community despite Frankenstein's destructive self-devotion, for they link him and his correspondents (Mrs. Saville and the reader) into a relationship that Frankenstein can neither enter nor destroy.

The revisions Mary Shelley prepared for the third edition of *Frankenstein*, published as part of Colburn and Bentley's Standard Novels series in 1831, reveal that her interests had changed in two significant ways during the thirteen-year interval. The most extensive revisions, some of which were outlined soon after Percy's death in 1822 (see Rieger, pp. xxii–xxiii), occur in Chapters i, ii, and v of Victor Frankenstein's narrative; their primary effects are to idealize the domestic harmony of Victor's childhood and to change the origin—and thus the implications—of his passionate ambition. The first alteration makes Frankenstein's imaginative aggression seem a more atrocious "crime," and the second transforms Frankenstein from a realistic character to a symbol of the Romantic overreacher. The revisions thus extend the critique of imaginative indulgence already present in the 1818 text and direct it much more pointedly at the blasphemy Shelley now associates with her own adolescent audacity. Yet, paradoxically, even as she heightens the domestic destruction the egotist causes, Mary Shelley qualifies his responsibility. For her new conception depicts Frankenstein as the helpless pawn of a predetermined "destiny," of a fate that is given, not made. The 1831 Frankenstein seems quintessentially a victim, like the monster, who now symbolizes more precisely what this kind of man is than what he allows himself to become. In both the text and her Author's Introduction, Shelley suggests that such a man has virtually no control over his destiny and that he is therefore to be pitied rather than condemned.

The revision almost all critics have noted is the transformation of Victor's fiancée, Elizabeth, from cousin to foundling. Shelley redefines her in this way partly, no doubt, to avoid insinuations of incest but also to emphasize the active

benevolence of Frankenstein's mother, who, in adopting the poor orphan, becomes a "guardian angel." This alteration, however, is only one of a series of changes that idealize the harmony of Victor's childhood home. In this edition, for example, Shelley gives more space to the protectiveness of Victor's parents (pp. 233–34) and to the happiness of his childhood ("My mother's tender caresses, and my father's smile of benevolent pleasure while regarding me, are my first recollections" [p. 234]). Not surprisingly, Elizabeth, as the potential link between Victor's childhood and his mature domesticity, receives the most attention. In 1831 Shelley presents her as a celestial creature, "a being heaven-sent," "a child fairer than pictured cherub" (p. 235). Elizabeth is both Victor's guardian and his charge; explicitly she embodies the regulating reciprocity of domestic love. "She was the living spirit of love to soften and attract: I might have become sullen in my study, rough through the ardour of my nature, but that she was there to subdue me to a semblance of her own gentleness" (p. 237). By emphasizing Elizabeth's pivotal role in what is now an ideal of domestic harmony, Shelley prepares to heighten the devastating social consequences of Frankenstein's imaginative transgression and to underscore further the loss *he* suffers through his willful act.

Despite this idealization of the family, in the 1831 *Frankenstein* the seeds of Victor's egotism germinate more rapidly within the home, for Shelley now attributes Frankenstein's fall not primarily to formative accidents or to his departure but to his innate "temperature" or character. "Deeply smitten with the thirst for knowledge," Frankenstein is now from his birth set apart from his childhood companions. Unlike the "saintly" Elizabeth or the "noble spirit[ed]" Clerval, Frankenstein has a violent temper and vehement passions. His accidental discovery of Agrippa is now preceded by a description of a more decisive factor, the determining "law in [his] temperature"; it is this inborn predilection that turns his desire "not towards childish pursuits, but to an eager desire to learn . . . the secrets of heaven and earth" (p. 237). The 1831 edition retains Frankenstein's suggestion that his father's negligence contributed to his "fatal impulse," but almost every alteration contradicts the implication that circumstances can substan-

tially modify inherent character. The 1831 Frankenstein resists modern science not because "some accident" prevents him from attending lectures but because "one of those caprices of the mind" distracts him from scientific speculations. By abandoning the mechanistic model of psychology and adopting instead the notion of desire as organically affixed to innate character, Shelley radically reduces the importance of external circumstances and emphasizes the inevitability of the overreacher's fall; at the same time, she pushes what had been a realistic narrative, framing the symbolic story of monstrous egotism, in the direction of allegory.

Shelley graphically dramatizes the "fatality" of Frankenstein's character in terms of a literal contest:

Thus strangely are our souls constructed, and by such slight ligaments are we bound to prosperity or ruin. When I look back, it seems to me as if this almost miraculous change of inclination and will was the immediate suggestion of the guardian angel of my life—the last effort made by the spirit of preservation to avert the storm that was even then hanging in the stars, and ready to envelope me. . . . It was a strong effort of the spirit of good; but it was ineffectual. Destiny was too potent, and her immutable laws had decreed my utter and terrible destruction. (p. 239)

Characterizing Frankenstein's psyche as a battleground between "destiny" and the personified "spirit of good" blurs the distinction between external coercion and personal desire and gives the impression that, in an important sense, Frankenstein is merely the passive victim of powerful external forces. This impression is reinforced by other crucial alterations in the 1831 text. When Frankenstein sets out for Ingolstadt, for example, he characterizes himself as being hostage to an irresistible "influence," to which he attributes a relentless intentionality: "Chance—or rather the evil influence, the Angel of Destruction . . . asserted omnipotent sway over me from the moment I turned my reluctant steps from my father's door" (p. 240). This "influence" has its counterpart in Frankenstein's own desire, but once more Shelley personifies its workings so as to make Frankenstein seem a victim:

Such were the professor's words—rather let me say such the words of fate, enounced to destroy me. As he [M. Waldman] went on, I felt as if my soul were grappling with a palpable enemy; one by one the various keys were touched which formed the mechanism of my being: chord after chord was sounded, and soon my mind was filled with one thought, one conception, one purpose. So much has been done, exclaimed the soul of Frankenstein,—more, far more, will I achieve. . . . I closed not my eyes that night. My internal being was in a state of insurrection and turmoil; I felt that order would thence arise, but I had no power to produce it. (p. 241)

This remarkable passage suggests that one's "soul" can be invaded by an enemy that, having taken up residence within, effectively becomes one's "fate." The "palpable enemy," which we know to be desire or the deadly pattern of nature itself, is no stranger to its chosen victim, but Shelley's repeated use of the passive voice and her depiction of the "soul" as a vessel to be filled, then objectified, make this "resolution" seem a visitation rather than an act of self-indulgence. Dramatizing the fragmentation of Frankenstein's psyche foreshadows, of course, the literal splintering off of the monster; but, equally important, it suggests that Frankenstein cannot be held responsible for the "destiny" he is powerless to resist.

The 1831 edition also elaborates Victor's misunderstanding of the natural world, but by extending his blindness to the most innocent of all the characters, Elizabeth, Shelley now makes Frankenstein seem only one dupe of nature's treachery. In the revised version of the scene in the Alps, Frankenstein's deception is all the more cruel because nature now specifically invokes memories of his harmonious childhood and even presents the face of his deceased mother: "The very winds whispered in soothing accents, and maternal nature bade me weep no more. . . . The same lulling sounds acted as a lullaby to my too keen sensations. . . . [The forms of nature] gathered round me, and bade me be at peace" (pp. 248–49). But this nature still holds only the monster, and when Frankenstein's trust and betrayal are extended to Elizabeth, Frankenstein's delusion becomes an inevitable curse of the human condition, not simply a fault of his own unleashed desire. In her revised letter in Chapter vi, Elizabeth celebrates nature's

benevolent constancy: "The blue lake, and snow-clad mountains, they never change;—and I think our placid home, and our contented hearts are regulated by the same immutable laws" (p. 243). But when Justine is executed, Elizabeth, too, learns the bitter truth. In this context, her heartrending speech (" . . . misery has come home, and men appear to me as monsters" [p. 80]), retained from the 1818 text, now emphasizes less that Elizabeth is Frankenstein's victim than that all men are unwitting victims of nature's violence and their own natural frailty.

As one might expect, Shelley also revises her portrait of Robert Walton to remove the alternative of self-control she now wants to deny Frankenstein. Walton's victory over egotism becomes less a triumph over desire than the consequence of a mysterious internal revolution. Initially, Walton describes himself as a man driven by two conflicting tendencies:

There is something at work in my soul, which I do not understand. I am practically industrious—pains-taking;—a workman to execute with perseverance and labour:—but besides this, there is a love for the marvellous, a belief in the marvellous, intertwined in all my projects, which hurries me out of the common pathways of men, even to the wild sea and unvisited regions I am about to explore.

(p. 231)

Walton too is a pawn of internal forces that, syntactically, seem not his own ("there is a love . . . which hurries me"). Thus, although in the 1831 text Walton's ambition is more pronounced, more like the young Frankenstein's, he is not wholly responsible for his actions. Just as Mr. Waldman is the external catalyst that precipitates Frankenstein's "destiny," so Frankenstein serves as the critical agent for Walton. Frankenstein's narrative resolves Walton's internal conflict and restores to him that domestic affection which has been all along the innate "groundwork of [his] character." Walton does not really assert himself or actively choose; rather, true to his character, to his original self-denying nature, he allows himself to be acted on by others, to respond to the needs of Frankenstein, then to those of the sailors in his charge.

Of the three narrations that compose *Frankenstein*, the monster's history receives the least attention in the 1831 revisions—no doubt be-

cause by this time Shelley sympathized even more strongly with the guilt and alienation that attend the egotist's crime. Moreover, by implication, the monster has become the appropriate extension of the curse of the artist, not the product of the self-indulgent ego. The monster's grotesqueness, its singularity are still signs of an essential transgression, but its pathetic powerlessness is now a more appropriate equivalent of the helplessness of Frankenstein himself.

It is interesting to speculate about the significance of these changes for Mary Shelley, to ask why she made her judgment of Frankenstein more specific and more severe at the same time that she relieved him of responsibility for his "destiny." I think the most important clues can be found in the introduction Shelley added to the 1831 text. There, in her selective memory of her younger self, she reveals a deep sense of kinship with the 1831 Frankenstein; she feels guilty about her "frightful" transgression perhaps but, in a saving sense, not responsible for the "hideous progeny" she created in the unladylike text of 1818.

Shelley's primary purpose in the 1831 introduction is to explain—and justify—the audacity of what now seems like blasphemy, to silence that question which, repeatedly asked, insistently raises the ghost of her former self: "How I, then a young girl, came to think of, and to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea?" (p. 222). Even *this* explanation must be justified, however, for Shelley wants most of all to assure her reader that she is no longer the defiant, self-assertive "girl" who, lacking proper humility, once dared to seek fame and to explore the intricacies of desire. Now "infinitely indifferent" to literary reputation, Shelley claims to be "very averse to bringing [her]self forward in print." Her commentary is permissible only because it concerns that other self which is, strictly speaking, not the mature or "personal" Mary Shelley at all: "as it will be confined to such topics as have connection with my authorship alone, I can scarcely accuse myself of a personal intrusion."

Her 1831 version of the dream that suggested the origin of the novel makes clear what Shelley is so eager to disavow: the monster's creator is referred to as an artist, and the artist's transgres-

sion (now characterized specifically as blasphemy) is followed by his fear and revulsion as he is forced to recognize in his "odious handywork" some hitherto repressed aspect of himself:

I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion. Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his odious handywork, horror-stricken. He would hope that, left to itself, the slight spark of life which he had communicated would fade; that this thing, which had received such imperfect animation, would subside into dead matter; and he might sleep in the belief that the silence of the grave would quench for ever the transient existence of the hideous corpse which he had looked upon as the cradle of life. He sleeps; but he is awakened; he opens his eyes: behold the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening his curtains, and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes. (p. 228)

The boldness with which she once pursued metaphysical speculations now seems, first of all, a defiance of one's proper place—here man's in relation to God but also, by extension, woman's in relation to the family. Clearly here, as in the thematic emphasis of the novel, Shelley expresses the tension she feels between the self-denying offices of domestic activity and the self-assertiveness essential to artistic creation. Before 1816, she explains, she did not respond to Percy Shelley's encouragement that she write because "travelling, and the cares of a family, occupied [her] time" (pp. 223–24). Now that she has pursued his designs she finds literary production to be a perverse substitute for a woman's natural function: a "hideous corpse" usurps what should be the "cradle of life."¹²

The monster, with its "yellow, watery, but speculative eyes," is also an objectification of the artist's self, and as such it simultaneously elaborates and diminishes the complex personality that is Mary Shelley. The temptation to become an object may be, as Margaret Homans has suggested, a particularly feminine peril;¹³

certainly for Mary Shelley objectification proved both alluring and terrifying, as her own testimony reveals. Expressing her self was particularly frightening to Shelley because, as we have seen, the gesture of objectification was for her an exile into the object world of nature—ironically, “maternal nature,” which is ultimately death and immediately a literalized landscape that swallows up all attempts at human meaning. In other words, through what Homans identifies as the traditional association of literal meaning with nature’s fatality (p. 2), the monster is doomed; objectification drives even this “thing,” which longs to speak, which acquires eloquence from the table scraps of human culture, into a realm where the imagination’s rich ideas are literalized and impoverished and where the primary vehicle of the imagination, language, loses its power to command more than momentary respect. As Mary Shelley projects her imagination she sees a monster, a vivified corpse, capable of commanding sympathy but, in all its actions and despite its desire, destroying every living being it touches—until, finally, it rejoins the natural world of death itself.

The terror Shelley associates with artistic creation, however, comes not just from the guilt of superseding one’s proper role or from a fear of the literal but also from the fear of failure that accompanies such presumption. The creation Shelley imagines is “odious,” “horrid,” “hideous,” imperfectly animated—a failure for all to see. The suggestion that the burden of the artistic creation consists in large part in its profoundly public nature also appears in the 1831 introduction. There Shelley distinguishes between her youthful, private fantasies of pure imagination (“waking dreams . . . which had for their subject the formation of a succession of imaginary incidents” [p. 222]) and the stories she actually wrote down, the “close imitations” she shared with her childhood friend Isabel Baxter. “My dreams were at once more fantastic and agreeable than my writings,” she explains. “The airy flights of . . . imagination,” in fact, she considers her only “true compositions,” for what she wrote was in “a most common-place style.” To write, for Shelley, is necessarily to imitate, and her models, almost all masculine, are both intimidating and potentially judgmental of her audacious foray into their domain and of what seems

the monstrous inadequacy of her objectified self. The fear of public scrutiny and judgment lies behind most of Shelley’s disclaimers of the artistic enterprise: “What I wrote was intended at least for one other eye—my childhood’s companion and friend; but my dreams were all my own; I accounted for them to nobody; they were my refuge when annoyed—my dearest pleasure when free” (p. 223). Thus when Mary Shelley places her imagination in the service of a text, a disconcerting transformation occurs: what was a harmless pastime becomes tantamount to a transgression, and, fueling the attendant guilt, the fear surfaces that if she does compete she will be found inadequate. Only the unbound and therefore nonbinding imagination can escape censure and thus protect the ego against exposure and pain.

Shelley’s distinction between imagination and imaginative creation would have surprised many of her male contemporaries. In his “Defence,” for example, Percy Shelley does not even consider the possibility of keeping imaginative insights private, for, in his theory, poets have a profoundly public responsibility—they are the “unacknowledged legislators of the World” (p. 508). Percy’s description centers on the self-expressive function of art; his authority derives from a masculine tradition of poet-prophets and his self-confidence from the social approbation accorded masculine self-assertion. Mary Shelley, however, lacking the support of both tradition and public opinion, separates the permissible, even liberating expression of the imagination from the more egotistical, less defensible act of public self-assertion.¹⁴ For Mary Shelley, the imagination is properly a vehicle for escaping the self, not a medium of personal power or even of self-expression. She therefore associates the imagination with images of flight, escape, freedom; writing she associates with monstrosity, transgression, literalization, and failure.

Mary Shelley does not, of course, wholly reject the artistic enterprise, no matter how adamant her renunciation. By 1831, in fact, she was an established professional writer; she supported herself and her son almost exclusively by writing, and her numerous reviews and stories, as well as her three novels, had earned her considerable reputation. Nor does she totally disavow kinship with the more defiant Mary God-

win. It is with felt intensity that Shelley vividly recalls her feeling of power when, having dared to imagine a “frightful . . . success,” the younger Mary triumphantly silenced her male critics: “Swift as light and as cheering was the idea that broke in upon me. ‘I have found it!’ . . . On the morrow I announced that I had *thought of a story*” (p. 228). But Shelley is now able to countenance the creation of *Frankenstein*—and, in effect, the creation of her entire artistic role—only because she views these creations as essentially the work of other people and of external circumstances. Thus Shelley “remembers” (sometimes inaccurately) the origin of *Frankenstein* in such a way as to displace most of the responsibility for what might otherwise seem willful self-assertion; essentially she offers a story that depicts the young Mary Godwin as a creation of others, a pawn, like Frankenstein, of forces larger than herself. Twice Shelley insists on Percy’s role in her project, his repeated desire that she “prove [herself] worthy of [her] parentage, and enrol [herself] on the page of fame”: “He was for ever inciting me to obtain literary reputation,” she adds (p. 223). She also (incorrectly) recalls the pressure her companions at Diodati exerted on her to produce a ghost story for their contest. The degree of embarrassment she records and the vividness of this inaccurate recollection suggest both her internalization of others’ assumed expectations and her insistence that the impetus come from outside. “*Have you thought of a story?* I was asked each morning, and each morning I was forced to reply with a mortifying negative.”¹⁵ Defensively, however, Shelley assures herself and the reader that she never entered directly into competition with her intimidating male companions. “The illustrious poets,” Byron and Percy Shelley, soon tired of the “platititude of prose,” and “poor Polidori” was hardly worth considering (perhaps because both poets openly ridiculed the doctor). “The machinery of a story” is the humblest of all inventions, she continues, reducing her accomplishment to its appropriate stature. All invention, in fact, she considers only a form of piecework: “invention, it must be humbly admitted . . . can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself” (p. 226). Even the “substance” of Shelley’s story comes from external sources. Ini-

tially, she is provoked by a conversation between Byron and Percy, “to which [Mary] was a devout but nearly silent listener”; and even her active contribution to these ideas (“moulding and fashioning”) is dramatized as if it were nearly involuntary.

When I placed my head on my pillow, I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie. I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision,—I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling before the thing he had put together. (pp. 227–28)

Then follows the text of the dream quoted above.

The waking vision “possesses” Shelley, just as the fateful, “palpable enemy” possesses the 1831 *Frankenstein*. “Horror-stricken” like her imagined artist, Shelley tries to “exchange the ghastly image of [her] fancy for the realities around”—“the dark *parquet*, the closed shutters” of her room. But she finds that she cannot escape the “hideous phantom” except by “transcribing” her “waking dream.” In other words, she can exorcise the specter of her own egotistical desire only by giving in to it as if to a foreign power—no matter how guardedly, with no matter what guilt.

Thus, in 1831, when Shelley revises her depiction of *Frankenstein*, she invests him with both the guilt she associates with her original audacity and the feeling of helplessness she now invokes to sanction and explain that audacity. In her need to justify her metaphysical boldness Shelley employs an almost Godwinian notion of Necessity: *Frankenstein*’s “character” is Fate incarnate; the artist, driven by Necessity, shadowed by guilt, is the powerless midwife to the birth of such “fatality” within human society itself.

The 1831 *Frankenstein* is neither Mary Shelley’s first nor her last embrace of powerlessness. *The Last Man* (1826), for example, is a protracted study of the “indissoluble chain of events” that sweeps mankind inexorably toward universal destruction, and even the more conventional *Falkner* (1837) presents “each link of the chain” of the past as having “been formed and riveted by a superior power for peculiar purposes.”¹⁶ In the course of her career, Shelley’s explanation of that power changes, as does

her evaluation of it, but consistently after 1818 she invokes some version of Necessity to link the turnings of plots and, more important, to explain her own behavior. Paradoxically, this wholehearted acceptance of an essentially subordinate position—like the symbolic presentation of the monster—affords Shelley precisely the grounds she needs to sanction her artistic endeavors. For the claim to powerlessness not only exonerates her from personal responsibility but also provides a socially acceptable rationale for self-aggrandizement—and thus a means of satisfying simultaneously her need for social approval and her desire to “prove [herself] worthy” of her parents and Percy Shelley. In her depiction of the monster and the 1831 *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley essentially raises feminine powerlessness to the status of myth, and thus, as we see in a diary entry from her journal of 1831, she is able to distinguish herself in the very gesture with which she seems to efface herself. As commentary on her life as a self-divided artist, her “apology” is worth quoting at length:

To hang back, as I do, brings a penalty. I was nursed and fed with a love of glory. To be something great was the precept given me by my Father: Shelley reiterated it. Alone and poor, I could only be something by joining a party; and there was much in me—the woman’s love of looking up, and being guided, and being willing to do anything if any one supported and brought me forward—which would have made me a good partisan. But Shelley died, and I was alone. My Father, from age and domestic circumstances, could not “*me faire valoir*.” My total friendlessness, my horror of pushing, and inability to put myself forward unless led, cherished and supported,—all this has sunk me in a state of loneliness no other human being has ever before, I believe, endured—except Robinson Crusoe.¹⁷

In her subordinate position Shelley finds something genuinely remarkable—a singular status worthy of dramatic presentation, like the omniscient victim-vanquisher Robinson Crusoe himself.

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Notes

¹ In Julian Marshall, *The Life and Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1889), II, 197.

² From “Blue Stocking Revels” (1837); quoted by R. Glynn Grylls, *Mary Shelley: A Biography* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1938), p. 211, n. 2.

³ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 3rd ed. (1831), in *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus (the 1818 Text)*, ed. James Rieger (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974), p. 227. All citations, to both editions, will refer to this text, in which Appendix B consists of a collation of the two editions.

⁴ *Quarterly Review*, Jan. 1818; quoted by Grylls, p. 316.

⁵ Shelley’s reading of her contemporaries’ egotism, while certainly colored by the inhibitions she, as a woman, had internalized, is an understandable interpretation. For example, Coleridge’s depiction of the artistic act as a repetition of “the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” appropriates godlike power for the poet, whatever Coleridge’s own doubts might have been in practice. The Byron of *Childe Harold*, parading his bleeding heart for all Europe, also conveys a sense of self-importance, and Percy Shelley’s image of the artist as priest-lawgiver-prophet assumes that the poet is all-powerful, or ought to be. In *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press,

1979), Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss both this masculine image of the poet and the “anxiety of authorship” it causes for women. Although I think that the dilemma was intensified by the Romantic image of the artist as creator, I essentially agree with their perceptive analysis of the self-doubts this image caused women, who read into the claims of male writers more confidence than the poets’ works sometimes reveal (see esp. pp. 45–64 and the discussion of *Frankenstein*, pp. 213–47).

⁶ Shelley seems to be answering, among others, William Godwin and David Hartley.

⁷ See esp. ll. 61–74 and 100–14.

there, many a precipice,
Frost and the Sun in scorn of mortal power
Have piled: dome, pyramid, and pinnacle,
A city of death, distinct with many a tower
And Wall impregnable of beaming ice.
Yet not a city, but a flood of ruin
Is there, that from the boundaries of the sky
Rolls its perpetual stream; vast pines are strewing
Its destined path, or in the mangled soil
Branchless and shattered stand.

(ll. 102–11)

⁸ For a discussion of the chains of signification that make up *Frankenstein*, see Peter Brooks, “Godlike

Science / Unhallowed Arts: Language and Monstrosity in *Frankenstein*," *New Literary History*, 9 (1978), 591–605.

⁹ For a discussion of Percy Shelley's participation in the revision of *Frankenstein*, see Rieger's introduction. Rieger goes so far as to assert that Percy's "assistance at every point in the book's manufacture was so extensive that one hardly knows whether to regard him as editor or minor collaborator" (p. xviii). The microfilms of the *Frankenstein* manuscript that I have examined in Duke University's Perkin Library (Abinger Collection, Reel 11) suggest that, while Percy made many marginal suggestions and probably helped recopy the manuscript, his contributions were largely stylistic and grammatical.

¹⁰ Mary Shelley, Preface, *Second Collected Edition of Percy Shelley's Poetry* (1839), in *Shelley: Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, new ed. corrected by G. M. Matthews (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. xxi.

¹¹ "A Defence of Poetry, or Remarks Suggested by an Essay Entitled 'The Four Ages of Poetry,'" in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), pp. 486, 487–88.

¹² In *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor-Doubleday, 1977), Ellen Moers proposes that *Frankenstein* is specifically "a birth myth," that the novel is "most feminine . . . in the motif of revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences" (p. 142). While Moers's insights seem to me suggestive, I think her equation of the monster and the newborn too limiting. Childbearing is only one kind of extension or projection of the self, and Shelley conflates several meanings in this central incident.

¹³ Homans, "Dreaming of Children: Literalization in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*," unpub. essay Yale Univ. 1979, pp. 1–2. According to Homans, women

cannot participate in [the dualism of self and other, or of self and object] as subjects as easily as men can. The feminine self is on the same side of that dualism with what is traditionally other. Women who do conceive of themselves as subjects—that is, present, thinking women rather than "woman"—must continually guard against fulfilling those imposed definitions by being transformed back into objects.

¹⁴ Shelley's endorsement of the nontextualized imagination is clear both from her portrait of Clerval, "a boy of singular talent and fancy" who gives up his childish composition of stories to become simply a connoisseur of natural beauty (p. 159), and from this journal entry of 1834: "My imagination, my Kubla Khan, my 'pleasure dome,' occasionally pushed aside by misery but at the first opportunity her beaming face peeped in and the weight of deadly woe was lightened" (see *Mary Shelley's Journal*, ed. Frederick L. Jones [Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1947], p. 203).

¹⁵ In his introduction, Rieger explains that Shelley is incorrect in remembering this mortification. "Polidori's *Diary* . . . records on 17 June, 'The ghost-stories are begun by all but me'" (p. xvii).

¹⁶ *The Last Man*, ed. Hugh J. Luke, Jr. (1826; rpt. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 290. *Falkner* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1837), p. 314.

¹⁷ *Journal*, p. 205. There is some confusion about the date of this entry. Although Jones places it in 1838, in n. 2 he agrees with Grylls that it properly belongs to 1831.