Frankenstein: Creation as Catastrophe
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On Frankenstein by Mary Shelley
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In "Creation as Catastrophe," Paul Sherwin takes a psychoanalytic approach to Shelley's novel, with the Creature arising from a kind of primal-scene trauma and seeking wholeness. In his restless pursuit of an impossible desire, the Creature resembles a sublime artwork, one that simultaneously represents and eclipses its creator. Thus, for Sherwin, the uncanny experience of bringing things back to life—whether they be the repressed trauma of the analysand or the reanimation of the Creature, mirrors the genesis of any sublime artwork.

As Frankenstein gets under way, we are lured by the promise of a new beginning: Walton's pathbreaking journey to the North Pole. Bound for Archangel to assemble a crew, Walton is inspired by the cold northern wind to envision a perpetually warm and radiant paradise at the summit of the globe. To be there would be to capture the heavens in a glance, to tap earth's central power source, and to stand within the magic circle of the poets he once sought to emulate but whose sublimity he could not match. Such extravagance is easier to credit if we keep in mind the uneasiness it is intended to dispel: "There is something at work in my soul, which I do not understand" (p. 21). Perhaps for his own good, and certainly at the dramatically right moment, the quest founders somewhere in the frozen wastes between Archangel and the Pole, just where Walton is waylaid by Frankenstein, who is feverishly pursuing the path of the Creature's departure. It may be more accurate to say that the quest is deflected. For although Walton is relegated to the periphery of the fiction, ushering in and out a wondrous tale that preempts his own, he is profoundly implicated as well. The tale, of course, is a monitory example meant for him, but it is also a riddle of fate that means him: the mystery that he is and that becomes his by virtue of his fascinated participation in Frankenstein's story. In short, Walton is in the critical position, and nowhere is his situation better evidenced than at the end of the novel. Frankenstein, burdened by his tale's monstrous residue, concludes his narrative by enjoining Walton to slay the Creature after his death. Yet the climactic encounter with the Creature unsettles everything even more and leaves Walton powerless to act. The final word and deed belong to the Creature, who vows to undo the scene of his creation once he bounds from the ship: "I shall seek the most northern extremity of the globe; I shall collect my funeral pile, and consume to ashes this miserable frame, that its remains may afford no light, my ashes will be swept into the sea by the winds" (pp. 222–23). To Walton, however, belongs the burden of the mystery as he watches this self-destroying artifact vanish into darkness and distance and contemplates a catastrophe at the Pole.

I.

Mary Shelley might well have titled her novel One Catastrophe after Another. For Frankenstein, who is dubiously in love with his own poly-morphously disastrous history, the fateful event to which every other catastrophe is prelude or postscript is the creation. According to the archaic model implicit in his narrative, transcendence is equivalent to transgression, and his presumptuous deed is invested with the aura of a primal sin against nature that somehow justifies the ensuing retributive bother. Condemned by nature's gods to limitless suffering, the aspiring hero learns his properly limited human place. Frankenstein, however, knows differently. A reading alert to the anti-Gothic novel Mary Shelley inscribes within her Gothic tale will discover that nothing is simple or single. The critical event is impossible to localize, terms such as "justice" and "injustice" do not so much mean as undergo vicissitudes of meaning, and all the narrators are dispossessed of their authority over the text. As the central misreader, Frankenstein is the chief victim of the text's irony, the humor becoming particularly cruel whenever he thinks he is addressing the supernatural powers that oversee his destiny, for his invocatory ravings never fail to conjure up his own Creature. Indeed, the evacuation of spiritual presence from the world of the novel suggests that Frankenstein is more a house in ruins than the house divided that its best recent critics have shown it to be. The specter of deconstruction rises: doubtless future interpreters will describe a text that compulsively subverts its own performance and that substitutes for its missing center the senseless power play of a catastrophic Gothic machine. Yet the Gothic is always already demystified, the ruin of an anterior world of
large spiritual forces and transcendent desires that the most relentless of demystifiers cannot will away. *Frankenstein*, although arguably a Gothic fiction, remains a living novel because it is a haunted house, ensouled by the anxious spirit that perturbs all belated romances. While the unconsummated spirit raised by *Frankenstein* cannot be put to rest, one might suppose that *das Unheimliche* can be contained within the spacious edifice of Freudian psychoanalysis. Freud's antithetical system provides an interpretive context for many of the anomalies disclosed by an ironic reading: the dissonance of overt and implicit meanings, the obscure sense of having trespassed on sacred ground, the appalling secret that craves expression yet must be protected as though it were a holy thing. In addition, the novel's catastrophic model functions in a way strikingly similar to the Freudian psychic apparatus. Instead of hubris, there is the drive's excess; instead of a downcast hero assaulted by phantasmagoria, there is the boundless anxiety occasioned by the proliferation of repressed desire; and instead of the restrictive gods, there is the exalted secondary process, intended to keep the apparatus stable by binding or incarcerating mobile energy. More telling, the catastrophic model is an almost exact duplicate of the oedipal scenario, the most privileged psychoanalytic thematic and the dynamic source of Freud's mature topography of the psyche. The way is opened for a recentering of the novel's unresolved intellectual and emotional turmoil.

II.

Writing on the occasion of *Frankenstein's* canonization, its inclusion in a "standard novels" series, Mary Shelley begins the Introduction as if discharging a grim obligation to a text that should long ago have been consigned to her buried past. She is roused again, however, when she returns to the moment of the novel's origin, her waking dream of *Frankenstein*'s emergence as a creator. Focusing on the creator's terror, she evokes the disturbing thrill of being there, in the midst of the traumatic scene, her prose mounting in intensity and shifting to the present tense as she recounts the successive stages of her vision: the powerful engine stirring to life the "hideous phantom"; *Frankenstein*'s hysterical flight; the "horrid thing" opening the bed curtains and fixing its eyes on him, an experience of ultimate dread that shatters the vision, leaving her breathless on her "midnight pillow" (pp. 9–10). What does it mean to be there, in the midst? It is to be swept up into a sublime dimension and to be faced by a dizzying void, to be at once an excited witness, the terrified artist, and the aroused form of chaos that gazes back at both creator and dreamer. Invention, Mary Shelley reflects, consists in creating "out of chaos" (p. 8). Once her imagination asserts itself, presenting her with the dream vision, we may associate the engine (*ingenium*, *genius*) with the usurping imagination, the animated Creature with the scene itself, and the chaotic mass to be set in motion with the writer's own chaos, the panic at the center of her authorial consciousness. Creator, creation, and creative agency are varying manifestations of the same anxiety that elaborates itself to compose the scene of authorship. The novel's monstrous heart of darkness is the creation, and the creative self that inaugurates the drama resembles the "self-closd, all repelling  Demon" encountered at the opening of *The Book of Urizen*. *Frankenstein*'s founding gesture, like that of Blake's fearful demiurge, is a stepping aside, but while Urizen secedes from Eternity, *Frankenstein* absents himself from our world of ordinary awareness and relatedness, which recedes from him in much the manner that a dream fades at the instant of awakening. Severing all contact with his family, other beings, and familiar nature, he is intent on hollowing out a zone in reality where he can be utterly alone. This ingressive movement is attended by self-loss, a radical shrinkage of his empirical self, and self-aggrandizement, a heightening of his isolate selfishness to daemonic status. He becomes a force instead of a person as all the energy of his being concentrates on his grand project: "My mind was filled with one thought, one conception, one purpose" (p. 48); "a resistless, and almost frantic, impulse urged me forward; I seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit" (p. 54). The animation project, like the object intended by the Freudian libido, is a secondary affair. What matters is that it enkindles in the projector a lust for self-presence so intense that it drives out of consciousness everything except itself. Reality must yield if the self is to appear, and *Frankenstein*'s primary creative act is to originate his own creative self. The vertiginous upward fall that founds the creative self coincides with a rupture between daemonic mind and all that is not mind. What may loosely be termed consciousness (of self, an extravagantly augmented self so full of itself as to allow neither time nor space for self-awareness) and unconsciousness (of the
normative world from which the self has detached itself) are twin-born, factoring out as discrete loci that mark the decisiveness of Frankenstein's psychic dislocation. Only in the catastrophic nature of this birth is there any significant point of contact with the repressive process that institutes ego and id as opposing agencies in the Freudian economy. Narcissism and, probably closer, psychosis are the appropriate psychoanalytic analogues, though the usefulness of these nosological entities here is questionable. I see no need, for example, to posit a specific libidinal stage or fixation point to which Frankenstein is regressing. But everything would resolve itself into a structural conflict anyway: Frankenstein's oedipal trouble impels his defensive "episode," which signals a victory of the forces of repression; and with the creation he spills back into the domain of assured analytic knowledge, the Creature amounting to a bizarre symptomatic return of the repressed that can be interpreted in the same way as the dream of a neurotic. For the psychoanalyst, then, the Creature is a figure that redoubles Frankenstein's literal unconscious complex, which is already present as an a priori with a determinate constitution; in fact, however, he is an autonomous agent, not a psychic agency, and Frankenstein's supposed unconscious is a figurative device, a critic's overhasty recourse designed to mediate or neutralize a puzzling discontinuity.

By what name shall we invoke discontinuity? For Milton in Paradise Lost it is Hell, a space carved out in the universe to receive the daemonic selfhood of Satan, for whom everything is a universe of death. The depth of one's particular hell is an index of how far one has fallen away from what might be perceived or known. The unconscious, in other words, is a modality of subjective experience whose meaning is estrangement. What Frankenstein creates, in order to create, is distance between his daemonized self and a newly alienated reality, and it scarcely matters whether we conceive this space as interior or exterior since it is a fantastic medial zone where the boundaries between self and world are impossible to distinguish. Within this void, between two created "nothings," self-consciousness appears. It is the place into which the baffled residue of Frankenstein's ordinary self has been cast. From its vantage, somewhere in the corner of Frankenstein's mind, it takes notes, watching with horrified fascination the extravagant career of a stranger that is also an uncanny variation of the self.

Out of this phantom place, in addition, the Creature emerges, as Blake's Enitharmon emanates from Los once Los 'closes' with the death image of Urizen, thus embracing the world view of the solipsistically withdrawn creating mind. The ungraspable Enitharmon, Los's loss and shadowed gain, embodies the suddenly exterior, objectified space that has opened up between Los and Eternity, or Los's alienated potential. The Creature is similarly a token of loss, a complex representation of the estranged universe Frankenstein has summoned into being by pushing away reality. Yet does the Creature, strictly speaking, represent Frankenstein's alienated potential? I suppose he can be read as the responsive, sympathetic imagination Frankenstein suppresses in order to create. From the psychoanalytic perspective, such repression would be very odd: imagine the id repressing the sublimated ego. The repression hypothesis must be rejected in any event because the Creature is something radically new and different, no more a double or a part of Frankenstein than Enitharmon is of Los. Instead, these emanative beings "stand for" their creators in the sense that they are interpolations, "transitional objects" (Winnicott) or texts, intended to rectify a catastrophic disalignment of self and world.

The creation is at once a new departure for Frankenstein and the climax of a developmental process that, as Wordsworth says, "hath no beginning." Frankenstein's narrative begins with an idyll of domestic bliss: in the protected enclave of his household all are incomparably virtuous and lovable; affections go deep, and yet everyone lives on the surface. Of course, it is all a lie, but the reader should be troubled by this absurdity no more than by the newborn Creature's walking off with Frankenstein's coat as protection against the cold. Just as anyone who wishes can discover the source of an individual's troubles in the past, since so much happened "there," readers inclined to locate the cause of Frankenstein's aberration in his youth will see what they expect to see in his narrative or will find that what they seek is all the more confirmed by its absence from the account. His fall may have been occasioned by Elizabeth's admission into the family circle, by William's birth, by the sinister 'silken cord' (p. 34) of parental constriction, or by a repressed primal-scene trauma. It doesn't matter: any psychotrauma is as true or as false as any other. Like all of us, Frankenstein begins fallen—or, better, falling. The brief idyll of his youth gives him something to fall away from; and the more remotely idealized the starting point, the more absolute or self-defining is his point of departure. Frankenstein simply announces that, as far back as he can remember, "the world was to me a secret which I desired to divine" (p. 36). That is, the fall from the wholeness of origins is rooted in his lust to overtake a hidden, receding presence, or a tantalizing absence, that lies behind appearances and disturbs his contact with things. This dualizing consciousness
is a given of his temperament, the destiny-assigned identity theme that he lives out in the sphere of science but that he could have expressed as well in exploration or authorship. Can we improve on Frankenstein's version, or on Coleridge's characterization of Iago as "a motiveless malignity"? The aptly named Iago is the ego principle, the sublimely arbitrary human will that originates everything, including all myths of a catastrophic or transcendental point of spiritual origination, and motive hunting no more explains his willfulness than it does Desdemona's love for Othello.

Motivation, like sequential logic, is a falsification the mind cannot do without. The signal importance Frankenstein ascribes to the death of his mother suggests that the reanimation project is a deferred reaction to this event, which he terms "the first misfortune of my life... an omen of my future misery" (p. 42). He dwells on the "irreparable evil" brought about by the rending of ties and on the "void" created by death, which he raises to quasi-supernatural status as "the spoiler" (p. 43). Presumably her death reactivates an original anxiety of deprivation associated with the departure of the maternal body, and the irrevocable loss of the mother, the primary focus of the child's reality bondings, could help to explain the intensification of Frankenstein's temperamental dualism. But while psychoanalytic theory is suggestive here, it is too restrictively bound to a particular mythic version of the past, too fetishistically centered on one of many possible mythic representations of loss. Like the oak-shattering bolt, the death of the mother is preeminently a narcissistic insult for Frankenstein. Confronted by the fact of death, he is overtaken by a primordial anxiety, not an anxiety-provoking repressed wish; and although such anxiety is apt to recoil from any number of fancied antagonists, its proper object is the most inclusive and irreducible of forces: life, our human life, in relation to which death is not an external agency but an internal component. Yet, as Kierkegaard knew, consciousness of this radical fault in existence need not, or need not only, paralyze the spirit. Dread, and perhaps even the fear of being delivered over to it, can be a sublime energizer, arousing the infinite spirit that longs for a house as large as itself.

Seeking to undo the consequences of sexuality, the sin of being born of woman, Frankenstein engages in a pursuit at once regressive and projective, mobilizing old energies in an attempt to discover a new meaning for himself. Adrift for a time after his mother's death, he is eager, once he leaves for the university, to cast off his dependence and put his talents to work. All that remains is for Waldman's sermon, perhaps more the sheer power of his voice than his overt message, to render an occasion for Frankenstein's restless drive for autonomy:

Such were the professor's words—rather let me say such the words of fate. As he 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. So much has been done, exclaimed the soul of Frankenstein—more, far more, will I achieve! I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation. (p. 48)

This powerfully charged moment of conversion, or reconversion, founds Frankenstein as an artist. From the struggle of his second birth he emerges as a force of destiny, genius in a human form, first pronouncing the fateful name of the modern Prometheus: franken Stein, the free rock, the free-unfree man.

After two years of reviewing the current state of scientific knowledge, Frankenstein is abruptly halted by an audacious, yet for him inevitable, question: "Whence did the principle of life proceed?" (p. 51). The way is opened for his first descent into the world of the tomb: "I beheld the corruption of death succeed to the blooming cheek of life; I saw how the worm inherited the wonders of the eye and brain." At this stage Frankenstein presents himself as a detached observer of death's work, and nature offers little resistance to his inquiries. "A sudden light" breaks "from the midst of this darkness" (p. 52), whereupon he is dazzled to discover himself the first of mortals capable of disentangling life from death. Modern criticism, generally empowered by demystifying reversals, has tended both to devalue Frankenstein's discovery, regarding his life principle as a type of natural energy rather than as a genuine first, and to view his enthusiasm as a mechanical operation of the spirit. Although the great Romantic faith in the omnipotence of thought is unquestionably allied to the scientist's baleful drive for manipulative control, they remain very distinct forms of the Cartesian legacy. To the extent that the artist in Frankenstein collapses into the technician he is a loser. But now, as he stands at the source, Frankenstein is a sublime quester who has found his muse, an answering subject to inspire and direct the quest, and his delight is that of a man who has come to recognize the glory of his own inner source, his originaire I am.

Once Frankenstein begins to describe the lengthy creation process his hitherto sequential narrative becomes curiously perturbed. The style is spasmodic, juxtapositive, and repetitive, obscuring temporal relations yet underscoring how radically divided the creator is. We hear from a practical Frankenstein,
who reasons that even an imperfect effort will lay the ground for future successes; a secretly selfish utopian idealist, who dreams of a new species blessing him "as its creator and source" (p. 54); and a domestic Frankenstein, who procrastinates "all that related to my feelings of affection until the great object, which swallowed up every habit of my nature, should be completed" (p. 55). Being swallowed up is the principal terror of the narrative consciousness dominating these pages, a de personalized, though suffering, observer of the wreck Frankenstein is becoming. Little is heard from the daemon-ized Frankenstein, in part because his experience of sublime uplift is wordless and in part because this "hurricane" (p. 54) has no time for words, though for the troubled eye of the storm time is agonizingly slow. Complicating matters is the superimposition of the narrative present on an episode that the fallen Frankenstein can be relied on to misconstrue, so that the complex web of the account becomes virtually impossible to unweave. Then, we may surmise, a dialectic of the following sort was at work: driving out and driven in, the creative self is agonistic, aggressively excluding otherness, and hence agonized, defensively immuring itself in resistance to any foreign body that would encroach on its sublime solitude; the barrier keeps breaking, however, leading to disabling bouts of self-consciousness, which in turn provoke even more audacious sublime rushes that threaten to overwhelm the ordinary self, that residual under-consciousness which clings ever more desperately to its bewildered identity. How one interprets the meaning of the entire experience—whether from the point of view of the daemonic self or from that of the ordinary self—probably tells more about the interpreter than about the experience itself, just as the Abyssinian maid of "Kubla Khan" emerges as the muse of paradise or the voice of the abyss depending on whether one stands inside or outside the magic circle of the conclusion.

The breathlessly eager self that is in, or is, the enthusiasm soars above the body that is taking shape. Frankenstein's workshop is located "in a solitary chamber, or rather cell, at the top of the house, and separated from all the other apartments" (p. 55). This is a masterful emblem of the mind that is its own place. The windows are barred, at least for the enthusiast, whose eyes remain "insensible to the charms of nature" (p. 55). Those "charms" are an interpolation of Frankenstein the notetaker or narrator; the creator is an innerness—pure, unconditioned spirit—seeking innerness—the life or light in, but not of, things. Things themselves do not exist for him except as "lifeless matter" (p. 52) to be animated, the fort to his da (sein); and the more they are leveled to a deadening continuity the more discontinuous is the fiery spirit that would stamp its image on a world rendered pliable to its projects and projections. The problem is that if the sublime artist is to "pour a torrent of light into our dark world" (p. 54) of mortal life, he must take a detour through reality. To wrest the spirit from things he must, for a second time, penetrate into the center of the earth, and to prepare a frame for the reception of life he must now not only see and know but also touch the body of death. Undertaking a shamanistic descent into chaos, a place of "filthy creation" (p. 55) where life and death conspire to breed monstrous shapes, Frankenstein is flooded with nausea: "Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil, as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave, or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay?" (p. 54). Is Frankenstein speaking of vivisection, or is the tortured living body his own? His aggression, whether directed outward or against himself, recalls that of Blake's Urizen:

Times on times he divided,& measur'd
Space by space in his ninefold darkness
Unseen, unknown! changes appeard
In his desolate mountains riifted furious
By the black winds of perturbation

For he strove in battles dire
In unseen conflictions with shapes
Bred from his forsaken wilderness
(The Book of Urizen 1.2–3)

Frankenstein too is entrapped by his own phantasmagoria. The oppressively close, enveloping tomb world into which he descends is a self-engendered abyss that discloses what our finite bodily ground looks like from the heights to which the spirit has ascended. Transforming an evacuated reality into a grotesque naturalization and the denied natural passions into a perversely eroticized shadow life, the sublime artist's exaggerated distance from things has also transformed him into a graveyard poet. In short, Frankenstein has discovered, or invented, an inchoate version of the Freudian unconscious. Frankenstein's aggression and perversive perception are inscribed in the Creature's appearance. The artist envisioned something quite different: "How can I delineate the wretch whom with such infinite
pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful" (p. 57). What did Frankenstein intend? Treading "heaven in my thoughts  exulting in my powers" (p. 211), he conceived the Creature as a representation of the transfigured creative self, a grandiose embodiment of the creator's mind. But it is also a desperate compromise, designed to mend an intolerable dualism. The beautiful Creature of Frankenstein's imaginings is analogous to Sin, the perfect narcissistic image of Satan, the interior paramour who explodes from his brain when heaven rolls away from him and with whom he proceeds to copulate; Frankenstein's dread monster corresponds to Sin's unrecognized "nether shape," but even more closely to Death, that chaotic "darkness visible," who is the ultimate issue of Satan's deranged spirit, his love of his own thought. The moving Creature, like Death, is unrepresentable. However, directly after the infusion of life, while the Creature is still dazed, Frankenstein ventures the novel's only description of this formless form: Beautiful!—Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with the watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips. (p. 57) An "unearthly" figure (p. 219), the Creature bodies forth the horrid contrast between heaven and hell that Frankenstein experiences as a dizzying, instantaneous descent.

How is one to explain this catastrophic turn? The only way to fathom the Creature's appearance, which is more a rhetorical effect than a natural fact, is to comprehend how it was made. For Frankenstein, putting together and dismembering are one. The parts he chooses are beautiful, but they are monstrous in conjunction—or, rather, since the Creature lacks a phenomenological center, in their absolute disjunction. Frankenstein is similarly unbalanced, a confused collectivity. The daemonized self that initiates the project is a force inimical to form, and it cannot see or guide properly from the heights. The normative self, desperately in need of bridging back to reality, patches over the rift in the fabric of Frankenstein's existence as best it can. But although its eyeballs start "from their sockets in attending to the details" (p. 55), it cannot recollect the original inspiration. The result of all this frantic alienated labor is a being geared to self- torment. As such, the Creature is also a figure that reveals, with more startling accuracy and profundity than discursive reason can command, the existential condition of its progenitor: his relation-disrelation to his world, his thoughts, and himself. The incomplete Creature, unmated and unmatable, an inconceivably lonely free standing unit whose inside is hopelessly divided from its outside, is indeed a "filthy type" (p. 130) of the modern Prometheus. Any representation of the creative process, whether the novel's narrative or my analytic account, is bound to distort the experience of the whole self. Suspended between heaven and hell, those absolutely disjoined fictive polarities that are in fact mutually sustaining correlates, the creator is at once ravished and ravaged by sublimity. He is filled and swallowed up, but not entirely full or emptied out; for to be wholly abandoned to the sublime would amount to autism, and there would no longer be a self to experience the uplift or downfall. It is always, to modify Emerson slightly, a case of I and the abyss. Since he cannot be the thing itself and cannot be nothing, Frankenstein is a spirit destined to "exult in the agony of the torturing flames" (p. 223). Another name for this giant agony is despair. "Despair," writes Kierkegaard, cannot consume the eternal thing, the self, which is the ground of despair, whose worm dieth not, and whose fire is not quenched. Yet despair is precisely self-consuming, but it is an impotent self-consumption . This is the hot incitement, or the cold fire in despair, the gnawing canker whose movement is constantly inward, deeper and deeper . This precisely is the reason why he despairs  because he cannot consume himself, cannot get rid of himself, cannot become nothing. This is the potentiated formula for despair, the rising of the fever in the sickness of the self. 4 Kierkegaard, dangerously on the verge of becoming the dread itself, is a better guide here than Freud, the great analyst of the concept of dread. As Kierkegaard would have it, Frankenstein is a prisoner of despair because his volatile spirit desires only to augment itself, because the self is not "grounded transparently in the Power which posited it" (p. 19). That Power, which may simply be a potentiated form of the despairing spirit, exists beyond the purview of Mary Shelley's fiction. But Frankenstein is empowered, and at times disabled, by a despair over the human condition, whose limits condemn the creator's sublime quest to the status of an extravagant, desperate wish. The novel's wisdom, not only imperfectly expressed by an advocacy of domestic bliss but in fact undercut by overt moralizing, is that we need "keeping" (p. 19), that we must be concrete in the same measure as we are abstract and that we must abide with the antinomies (life and death, ideality and actuality, will and fate) that constitute
our ground. Frankenstein may be said to err in misreading both his own reality and the larger reality that circumscribes his existence. No matter how great the spirit within him, the universal life principle he thinks he has captured, although it is not merely a trick of spirit, can never become his instrument for correcting existence. It "was now within my grasp," he says; he adds, however, that "the information I had obtained was of a nature rather to direct my endeavours so soon as I should point them towards the object of my search . I was like the Arabian who had been buried with the dead, and found a passage to life, aided only by one glimmering, and seemingly ineffectual, light" (pp. 52–53). Dazzled by an obscure revelation, he can only move toward the light, for the power source he taps is a constituent element in an ongoing process, a continuum of animation and deanimation according to whose subtle rhythm of recurrence we live and die every moment. Frankenstein is a thief of fire, and the utmost he can do is to transmit the power to a body capable of sustaining life.

His nervous symptoms become increasingly pathological as the time for the Creature's inspiration nears, and once he is about to perform the deed, finding himself in a recognizably realistic setting, Frankenstein is less anxious than melancholic, as though calamity has already struck. What possible act or object could satisfy the aspirations of the uncreated soul? The dream of the sublime artist's overflowing fullness is grotesquely parodied as Frankenstein sickens into creation: "the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open" (p. 57). What is bracketed here, at the decisive moment of Frankenstein's reentry into reality, is the infusion of the spark of life. The creative act is a mindless reflex, an indication that the creator has fallen away from his desire into a void that nothing can fill but that somehow must be limited, as in The Book of Urizen, by a barrier of "solid obstruction." The Creature, though not quite setting a limit to Frankenstein's nightmare, is hell's bottom. Landing there, Frankenstein sees his Creature for the first time when its eyes open, a negative epiphany revealing to him that he is not alone, that he too is now visible. The nightmare follows, with its horrific climactic emblem of the condition of corporeality, and he wakens to confront the self -impelled Creature, the living image of death this new Orpheus has brought back from the house of the dead. The creator's terror attests to his lack of mastery, the grim fact of his own creatureliness, which is what set the creative process in motion. Beholding the Creature, Frankenstein is back at his original impasse, uncannily subject to the recurrence of his dread of time, space, and the body of death.

It is impossible to know what Frankenstein apprehends at the pivotal instant when his half- extinguished candle is eclipsed by the Creature's dull yellow eye, but the former seeker of the inner light almost immediately fixates on appearances. The overwhelming irony is that Frankenstein has opened up a space in reality for the emergence of something radically new, realizing the power to make literally present that the poets have always dreamed of. A presence so full that it is as unapproachable as light or an absence so great that it confounds the representational faculties, the Creature is the sublime or grotesque thing itself. Frankenstein's all too human failure of response is to petrify his living artifact into an otherness that cannot be restituted by mind. The Creature becomes a blocking agent, standing between Frankenstein and the normative world he longs to rejoin, and an uncanny reminder of the creator's alienated majesty, the sublime experience from which he is henceforth irremediably estranged. This unproductive misreading, though saving him from an encounter with Dread itself, condemns both Creature and creator to anguished incompleteness. Locked into an interminable pursuit of the shadow he has become, Frankenstein emerges as the man who cannot emerge, a prisoner of the passage arrested at the moment of his falling away from his own possible sublimity. The final irony is that his solitude is confirmed. Frankenstein achieves his own separate consciousness of himself as the most wretched of mortals. But even if his egotism is such that he glories in this doom as the token of a special destiny, he has become just another Gothic hero-villain, a tiresome neurotic whose presence impoverishes the larger portion of the novel that bears his name.

III.

There is an intriguing relation between Frankenstein's history and the account of the novel's genesis in the Introduction. Although the vocation of protagonist and novelist is in a sense chosen by their temperaments and circumstances, the origin of the creative enterprise is supremely arbitrary: a spell of bad weather. Confined indoors, Frankenstein is set on the path toward creation after he "chanced to find a volume of the works of Cornelius Agrippa" (p. 39), and Mary Shelley is bestirred after "some volumes of
ghost stories”—less threatening models for a literary aspirant than are her companions, Shelley and Byron—"fell into our hands" (p. 7). This archaic matter requires supplementation, and the means of carrying out the project is offered by Waldman's lecture on modern science and by Shelley and Byron's conversation about galvanism. At this juncture, however, two defensive reversals aim to differentiate the careers of active author and passive subject. The sudden light that breaks in upon Frankenstein impels him toward his catastrophic creation scene, but it is only after her waking dream that Mary Shelley experiences her vocational moment: "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." The vision of the would-be master's victimization is her means of mastery, as though the scene of authorship were already behind her. "And now, once again, I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper" (p. 10), she writes, as though the novel were the Creature and she had put on its power to overwhelm others. In the Introduction she passes over the actual writing of Frankenstein, and while her creative labor was doubtless less calamitous than Frankenstein's, the novel is necessarily another "imperfect animation" (p. 9). How much, one wonders, was lost in "translation" when the airy book imagination wrote in the mind became the novel we read? But the likelihood is that the ecstatic dream of the book, as represented in the Introduction, is an afterbirth, that now, once again, Mary Shelley is begetting it by replaying both Frankenstein's andFrankenstein's catastrophe of origination. Her mind, too, was the haunt of a terrible idea, which became her means of mastery insofar as it inspired the novel's transcendent or paradigmatic vision of the genesis of any sublime artwork, any uncanny reanimation project.

According to the novel's representation of the creative process, the work emanates from an authorial self whose decisive break with normative experience clears a space for the work to appear. The emergence of this authorizing agency necessitates such a massive withdrawal or sacrifice of the writer's identity that the work is likely to be more estranged from writer than reader. To argue thus is not to deny that Mary Shelley, as mother and mourning mother, was ideally suited to preside over the account of Frankenstein's fearful literal creation. But even if we agree that the novel is informed by her personal experience and that the novel, had it been anonymously published, would be recognizably a woman's book, we cannot necessarily trace its creation back to her empirical self or conclude that its meaning is coextensive with its point of departure in personal experience. The role of the writer's biography and psychobiography in the work is analogous to that of what Freud calls the "day's residue" in the dreamwork. Once the author crosses from the empirical sphere to the transcendent dimension of art, the stuff of ordinary experience is reconstituted as an element in the work's fantastic scenario, and the empirical self, transformed for good or ill by the author's rite of passage, is simply along for the ride. Still, if it is the Real Man or Woman, the Blakean Imagination, that solicits our response in a literary text, we must be careful not to be carried away by Blake's sublime idealizations or capital letters. The authorial self must not be vaporized into an impersonal transcendental consciousness. The writer may be powerfully tempted to become a force refusing all form, but the constitutive subject I am positing has its own complex psychology, determined by its relations to the forms, images, and desires that compose the field of literature. That is to say, the authorial self, like the empirical self, is a living consciousness, not so much disembodied as differently embodied.

What does it mean for the Word to be incarnated, for the work to be written? "When composition begins," writes Shelley, "inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet." We recall that when Frankenstein infuses the spark of being into the lifeless thing before him, his candle is "nearly burnt out." Shelley's version is that "the mind in creation is as a fading coal."5 Composition is at once the shattering of mind and the scattering of dead or dying thoughts, mere leavings, ashes and sparks that are the casual by-products of the 'unextinguished hearth' of original inspiration. Art is a betrayal of its source. Lapsing into discourse, the artist utters a dismembered Word. Alienated by the words intended to mediate it, the Word assumes the opacity of what stands for it and is evacuated by what stands in its place. To be represented by the text is thus to experience a bewildering effacement or defacement of the self; the authorial self, in other words, is as much estranged from the work as the empirical self. Of course, it can be argued that the authorial self is merely an effect of textuality, not an originate presence: "Always already"—one hears the insistent murmur of Derrida, echoing Heidegger—textualized. That may be so. But I find it impossible to think about literature without retaining the notion of the creative imagination, if for no other reason than that some such mythic agency is needed to link the completed text to the self that paces about the room and chews pencils. Dr. Johnson, who greatly respected literary power, shows himself to be at least as advanced as the most modern demystifier when he terms imagination a "hunger
which preys incessantly upon life" (Rasselas, Ch. XXXII). Perhaps, then, it would be more accurate to say that the artist, instead of falling into textuality, falls back on the text to avoid becoming lost in his or her own void. Composing the work, the writer touches ground. Inasmuch as writing is always a reworking of the already written, of literary tradition, it is not the writer's own ground, but it is just as surely the true ground of his or her being, inasmuch as reanimating the dead is the self-alienating labor that constitutes authorship.

However universal Frankenstein's experience may be, his failure as an artist is also particular, a merely personal torment. He counsels Walton not to aspire to be greater than human nature will allow. How great is that? In flight from his catastrophic scene of authorship, Frankenstein seeks consolation in the Alps, declaring that the Power is there, elsewhere, invested in Mont Blanc. Here the human being is a dwarfed late comer, the sole unquiet thing, and Frankenstein, with dubious ecstasy, yields up his spirit to the "solitary grandeur" (p. 97) presiding over this ancient desolation. But although vowing not "to bend before any being less almighty than that which had created and ruled the elements" (p. 94), he is surprised by his massive and all but omnipotent Creature, the only presence amid this blankness and a fit emblem of his god of Power. Ultimately, the terrific god means "I am terrified"—whether by chaos or the space of absolute freedom remains for the interpreter to decide. Like the speaker of Blake's "Tyger," whose own estranged genius can be read in his distorted visions of a beast and of a beastly creator so fearsome he can be represented only by piecemeal images, Frankenstein is absurdly frightened out of his creative potential by his own creations.

Is it possible to put on power and yet avoid crippling anxiety? Shelley believed so, and his "Mont Blanc" is a serious parody of the "cease less ravings" of Coleridge's "Hymn before Sun Rise," a poem Frankenstein might have written. Shelley himself is nearly overwhelmed by nature's power display and the spectral deity it represents. However, "one legion of wild thoughts," a saving remnant, wanders to "the still cave of the witch Poesy," and from within this zone of calm, carved out of the rock of nature, he recalls the power of his own adventuring mind to image and give voice to "the secret Strength of things." In Prometheus Unbound, among other things a reply to Frankenstein, Shelley exemplifies his hope that an impotently self-consuming despairing man can be therapeutically remembered as an artistic self whose strength derives from the embrace it gives. Bending reality to the shape of his desire, Shelley does not overlook that aspect of the self which cannot participate in a radiant world new-made by mind. Rather, he enjoins a heroic labor of self-creation, an unceasing struggle to redeem "from decay the visitations of the divinity in man" (III, 139) by converting man's spectral component into the medium through which imagination discovers and presents itself. I know that many nowadays regard the Shelleyan creative eros as a phantom. But this supreme fiction, barred from the power that would express it and perhaps coming to be recognized as imagination by virtue of its very inexpressibility, is no lie. The imagination is a real ghost haunting the ceaselessly active mind, and if it can rightly be called a "linguistic fiction," the reason is that this efficacious spirit is the voice that powers the shuttle of representative language. Representation is not only hounded by the curse of mediacy; it can better an original "presence," subliming instead of merely sublimating it, even as Frankenstein engenders a being superior to, or at any rate sublimely other than, his creator.

It is at once peculiar and apt that when we begin reading Frankenstein the authoritative voice that addresses us in the Preface is not the author's but her husband's. That the author herself experienced some confusion between mine and thine seems likely. According to James Rieger, Shelley'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). Is it coincidental that Frankenstein, discovering that Walton "made notes concerning his history asked to see them, and then himself corrected and augmented them" (p. 210)? The Shelley—Frankenstein connection has been a frequent source of speculation among the novel's critics, and there is general agreement that Mary Shelley is either deeply divided in her response to Shelley and the entire Romantic enterprise or else downright hostile, using the novel as an instrument of revenge against her (supposedly over idealistic, uncourageous, and insensitive) husband.7 But in the Introduction, as elsewhere, she defies Shelley and Shelleyan poetry, writing of his "far more cultivated mind" (p. 6) and ascribing his failure to pursue the ghost-story competition to his annoyance with "the platitude of prose" (p. 8). In part, I suspect, she aggrandizes Shelley here because she wants him out of reach. When she says that "he was for ever inciting me to obtain literary reputation" (p. 6), it sounds like a complaint; and when she maintains that she was indebted to him only for his encouragement, she ignores the challenge that Shelley's literary efforts represented to her and their critical role in the genesis of her novel.
Although the banal note Mary Shelley was to append to Alastor belies the extraordinary generative power of that work, Shelley's first major poem, published a year before Frankenstein's conception, exerted a more decisive influence than any of the traditional analogues the novel engages. I think it is safe to say that the focal enigma of Alastor, a poem that becomes more difficult to read the better one knows it, is the visionary maid who inspires the Poet's quest. Most obviously, she is an autoerotic projection of the Poet, himself an autoerotic projection of Shelley's authorial self. Both narcissistic double and incestuous twin, she figures forth not only the imaginary other, text or muse, that is the Poet's perfect complement but whatever he lacks. Whether or not there is indeed an answering subject for the Poet to quest after is left unresolved. What is clear, however, is that so long as he remains mortal he can no more capture or merge with her than he can embrace the wind. Hopelessly divided between a historical narrative of disenchantment and a hysterical rage to cast out all that stands between the Poet and his desire, the poem is a kind of moving fixation. Bursting every natural limit that impedes his quest, the Poet keeps encountering new abysses, dangerous centers of power or vacancy that he is daemonically driven toward yet that his daemonic drive to be always ahead of himself keeps impelling him beyond, and in this perpetual self-rending movement the poem profoundly realizes the essence of the quest tradition.

It might seem that, although Frankenstein aspires to be a paradigmatic text of texts, Alastor is the paradigm defining the novel's vision and scope. Anticipating Frankenstein's career, the Poet renounces home and hearth to pursue "Nature's most secret steps" (I.81); in the midst of the ruins of the past, he is startled by a sudden light, as meaning flashes "on his vacant mind / like strong inspiration" (II.126–27); he is now ready to envision the form of his desire, whereupon his lust to body it forth precipitates him "beyond all human speed" (I.361) while at the same time wasting his "frail human form" (I.350); finally his spirit is wasted too: pursuing the path of a departure to its inevitable terminus (see I.368 and Frankenstein, pp. 98, 203), this frightful solitary has become a hollow voice, "Ruin call[ing] / His brother Death" (II.618–19). In one respect Mary Shelley exceeds the literalizing ferocity of her husband's poem. While the visionary maid is a teasingly elusive or illusive literalization of Wordsworth's visionary gleam and Coleridge's Abyssinian maid, the Creature is a figuration that is at once richer and more sublimely literal than its original. This transformation, moreover, suggests that Frankenstein may be viewed as a deidealizing critique or misreading of Alastor. Retaining the poem's fundamental desire, the novel subverts it by altering the context in which it is lodged. The idealized quest for the epipsyche, or soul out of my soul, engenders the Creature, who is not only a "horrid thing" from which Frankenstein recoils in disgust but a voice of protest against his creator's lack of responsiveness. Frankenstein, then, would seem to oppose Alastor's desperate sublime yearnings with a countermyth of continuity and reciprocity. The main trouble with this reading is that it underestimates the strength, complexity, and sophistication of Shelley's poem, which subverts Frankenstein far more powerfully than the novel subverts the poem. What is most remarkable about Alastor is that the force of the Shelleyan sublime is great enough to withstand the rugged doubt to which it is always in danger of succumbing. Thomas Weiskel, a superb interpreter of the poem and of the Romantic sublime in general, argues that the energy of Shelley's high style "results almost entirely from what is being denied or suppressed."

But I think Shelley neither ignores nor represses what Weiskel terms the "fictionality of desire"; he simply outstrips his own self-consciousness. If the light of sense were to go out in Shelley's moments of glory, he could not gauge how high he had risen or how fast he was going and he would have no limits to mock. Such mockery, which is the utmost the sublime mode can achieve for both writer and reader, applies to the Poet insofar as he affixes his desire to a single image and is in turn mocked, though not canceled, by all that checks the spirit's flight. As the Poet, an "elemental god" (I.351), surges across the ocean in his rifted boat and the tormented element rages below, the self-division that characterizes the scene of writing is rendered more vividly and subtly than in Frankenstein. The continually felt presence of the Narrator, at once deeply attracted to and repelled by the Poet's solipsistic quest, is an additional enrichment. Like Mary Shelley's novel, Alastor can be reduced to a moral fable advocating human sympathy, but the poem embodies this theme in the Narrator's response and expresses it overtly only in the Preface.

While Shelley gives the overwhelming impression of being the voice of the chasm world of 'Kubla Khan' and at the same time a consummately ironic outsider, Mary Shelley is neither inside nor outside enough. Ultimately, Frankenstein is not a masterful representation of Frankenstein's failure, because the author is more bewildered by than secure in her liminal status. She is akin to the Narrator of Alastor, who knows the sublime only through the more relentlessly driven Poet, or her Walton, a failed poet who remains susceptible to the allure of the daemonic yet preserves his contacts with home and hopes to regulate his frightening desires. There is, however, no true domestication of desire in Frankenstein, and certainly
the novel's praise of domestic affection opens no liberating verbal space. Perhaps Walton will be a wiser man when he returns home, but he will be embittered by all he has failed to achieve. The terrible truth haunting Frankenstein is that, despite its redundant melodramatic excess, 'a voice / is wanting' (Prometheus Unbound n.iv.II.16). According to Walton, Frankenstein is a type of Milton's Raphael: "he possesses an intuitive discernment unequalled for clearness and precision; add to this a facility of expression, and a voice whose varied intonations are soul-subduing music" (p. 29). But we never hear this music, and only the Creature's poignant farewell, a passage that Shelley seems to have been largely responsible for (Rieger, p. xviii), exemplifies the effortless control or grace that is the supreme mark of power. Except for the idea of the Creature, an instance of the critic's sublime rather than of the reader's, the novel does not achieve sublimity, which remains an alienated episode of Frankenstein's recollected history. Free to fall, the modern Prometheus discovers that on her tongue there is a stone.

Notes

1. Mary Shelley, Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus, ed. M. K. Joseph (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969); all page references to the novel, unless otherwise noted, are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.


3. See the second section of Freud's Beyond the Pleasure Principle for the fort/da (gone/here) interplay.


Citation Information