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Frankenstein: *A Child's Tale*

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Mary Shelley must have been very lucky at cards. It's not as if she was unhappy at love: she was full of passions, and they were often stormily requited. But she was certainly unlucky, from the moment of her birth. There is something irremediably capricious about her fate, as there is about the composition and destiny of her most famous novel and about its wildly excited contents. Young as she was, its author, after all, had led a profoundly disrupted life. Perhaps that is why *Frankenstein* will not settle into any composed pattern of either individual or group meanings. It is written with head and heart inseparably, and its turbulent energies overwhelm any ideology we may discern in it. Critics have found it a more or less direct representation of Shelley's biography, a reckoning with the ideas of her parents, a fable of the role of women, or of the unconscious, or of family or social structures, or of political turmoil, of scientific discovery, of colonialism, economic theory, capitalist enterprise, or literary production.[1] Their accounts succeed, for Frankenstein's monster spells trouble, in almost any imaginable sphere of life. But they do not satisfy.[2] The present essay begins by confronting the novel's unruliness head on and continues by linking its form not to the author's beliefs but to her situation. Expression more than representation, *Frankenstein* like its monster grips by virtue of its ungraspability. The novel was a piece of luck called out by the unhappy yearnings of an author who was barely more than a girl when she conceived it. One surmises that it embodies the only form she knew—the unformed, inchoate existence of childhood. I undertake to demonstrate the prescient if unthematized intuition of early experience that Shelley's adolescent masterpiece bequeathed to its readers.

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[1] On *Frankenstein* and the role of women, see Rubinstein; Gilbert and Gubar 213-47; Johnson; Jacobus 99-103; Behrendt, "Mary Shelley"; and Hendershot 73-86 ("femininity as a negative weakness" [85]). On the unconscious, see Wexelblatt, Oates, and Collings. On family and social structure, see Mellor, *Mary Shelley* 38-51 (arguing that Shelley wants "a mutually supportive, gender-free family" [44]); Claridge; Crisman; and Komisaruk. On politics, see Botting and Randel (who offers an intriguing, particularly explicit allegorization). On science, see Jordanova; Mellor, *Mary Shelley* 89-114; Rauch 96-128; and, less successfully, Vasbinder, Hansen, Tim Marshall (a long and chaotic book), and Runcini 192-212. On colonialism, see Spivak; Bohls; Lew; Malchow 9-31; and Mellor, "*Frankenstein*" (the most careful account). On economics, see Montag (who tries with some success to transcend "mere allegory" [305] and elucidate structure and process) and Kaufmann 30-64. On capitalism, see Moretti, Michie, and Clemens 89-122. On literature, see Holquist 90-106 for excellent insights concerning rhetoric and literary sources.

[2] Here I follow Lawrence Lipking's spirited and unhackneyed essay in resisting any clear or settled message. Lipking identifies Rousseau's pedagogical novel *Emile* as a crucial source for *Frankenstein,* but does not connect the source with the topic of childhood on which the present essay focuses.

What is Gothic About *Frankenstein*?: The Question of Form

My operating premise is that thematic readings must give way to formal readings if we are to grow beyond the impasse that arises from the presence of too many successful accounts of the novel's message. Much of the criticism reads like a course in applied Frankensteinics. In linking the novel to concerns familiar from other romantic writers, critics tend (in varying degrees, of course) to gloss over what is unique about the book or what links it in particular with its nominal peer group, the gothic novels. There are many essays about *Frankenstein* that never hint at the fact that it is a fantastic tale, and indeed was one by design.[3] I start, then, where many essays leave off, or with what, too often, they leave out altogether.

For whatever light gothic novels and their ilk might shed on real-life questions, the world they portray is not like the real world. Critics who "allegorize" fantastic fiction, as Todorov charges (63-79), reduce it to the mundane. He contends, by contrast, that its very meaninglessness, or radical uncertainty, produces a triumph of pure form. Hence for him the fantastic *is* the literary— meaning distilled into sheer wonder. In a related approach, Kaufmann has argued that *Frankenstein* undoes definitions: in its "deconstruction of exemplary readings and stable allegorizations," it offers a utopian promise of happiness in a Nietzschean realm beyond any definable truths (63). Aestheticizing critics are unfazed by monsters; they delight in a world that is "unfinalizable" or that "appeals to our clandestine fascination with heteronomy and irresponsibility" (Winkler 192).[4] This is, however, the converse error. Gothic novels are not pure anything other than themselves. Todorov confuses the gothic novel's remoteness from real experience with great generality, as if the gothic were a quintessence rather than a distinctive literary kind.

We cannot escape the novel's grip so easily. "Unfinalizable" has too ready a ring of Kant's purposeless purpose. However estranged from everyday experience, the gothic is not irrelevant to it. Pure fantasy is represented by Walton's embarkation on a "wind of promise" (9) toward an imagined "region of beauty and delight" (10). But he at once acknowledges these Kantian formalisms as "day dreams" (9) like those of "a child ... in a little boat" (10), and bitter cold soon

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3 Crook gives a nice list of incidental gothic topoi echoed in *Frankenstein*, often in attenuated form (58).

4 Winkler uses this last phrase to explain the attraction in "the fantastic destabilization of meaning" (190). "Unfinalizable" is Howard's term for a book similarly intended to get beyond a "*comfortable* pluralism" (284, 11). Howard thinks of literature as ideology-critique and invokes Gramsci at the end, but is more articulate about the novels as "a juggling act of no mean proportions" than about "a certain amount of slippage" that they are "not ... without" (141, about *The Mysteries of Udolpho*). Consequently, against her intentions, her pluralism, too, seems to me admiringly contemplative and, in tendency, aestheticizing. Craig, in another Bakhtinian essay, discusses the failure of proper dialogization—a sociological rather than an aesthetic generalization. Cantor 103-32 fuses moral and aesthetic allegories in a well-argued discussion of "the position of an alien being" and of a "suffering creature" (a monster only in physical appearance, but psychologically a twin of its creator) as projections of "the Romantic conception of the artist's relation to society" (129, 132, 129).

unmasks them as a delusion. Perfection is unattainable. Like the monster, the novel is misshapen; its strength lies in the revelation of its disabilities, not in their transformation or redemption.[5] The mode of *Frankenstein* is not aesthetic but metaphysical; that is, it characterizes in specific (not generalized) ways the ultimate factors conditioning human experience. Without undue technicality, my account of *Frankenstein* aims to shift from both thematic-particularizing and aesthetic-generalizing discourses toward an abstracting one.[6]

Gothic novels were often the product of apprentice writers. There is typically a struggle either to exploit or to master an unruly surface. Partly because it is shorter than other gothic classics, *Frankenstein* is singularly jolted between violence and reflection. The open-ended novel's exploding frames unsettle its meaning, and neither the turbulent nature imagery nor the angry sociopolitical content can be sublated into pure play. With sublimities too pervasive for Burkean psychologizing and too intensely felt for Kantian moralization, no mere exhortation can tame its adolescent extravagance. In the same landscape, Percy's "Mont Blanc" imagines a "voice ... to repeal / Large codes of fraud and woe"; Mary's novel does not. It is a diagnosis, not a cure, and for lack of catharsis has never resided comfortably within the aesthetic, high-art canon. Consequently the monster can easily seem more contemporary to twenty-first century, posthuman sensibilities than to the classics of high romanticism. Like Lyotard's "inhuman," Shelley's monster is *"the Thing"* (Lyotard 142), disfigured by a residue of unformed matter that resists our domination.[7] Form and its pathologies are the key to *Frankenstein*'s significance, not in order to instill wondering admiration but to acknowledge what its irrationalities open up.

The decisive question is so obvious that it hasn't much troubled critics — namely, what is special about the plot of *Frankenstein*? Probably most readers sense the problem: the book isn't as good as the movie. *Any* movie. The back cover of one cheap paperback describes some of the book's departures from conventional expectations: "Many readers, familiar with the Hollywood movies of *Frankenstein*, and opening the book for the first time, may be surprised not to find themselves transported at once to a remote castle, complete with galvanic flashes

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[5]   See Elfenbein's related discussion of disability in Byron.

[6]   Voller's book offers a treatment of the gothic that is "'metaphysical' ... in a popular sense" (17), building on my "Philosophical Approach to the Gothic Novel," where earlier literature on *Frankenstein* is cited. The sentences in the present essay about the inversion of day and night and the absence of community derive from the earlier essay.

[7]   In Lacanian terms, "the monster..., like the modern subject in general, is located there where knowledge of him is omitted. His monstrosity is therefore structural, not accidental" (Copjec 31). In a similar spirit Mellor writes, "The Creature is the unknowable thing in itself" (*Frankenstein* 103), though in its optimism this essay finally seems less an interpretation of the novel than a response to it. Clayton is particularly suggestive in linking *Frankenstein* to postmodernist concerns, though I find it misleading to suggest that the uncouth monster is "deeply *embodied*" (65, Clayton's italics). Hogle has recently given a different postmodernist answer to the question of what is gothic about *Frankenstein*; examining images rather than plotting, he sees the novel as a paradigm of Kristeva's abjection and Baudrillard's counterfeits, without sufficiently acknowledging the vitalist energy of Baudrillard's simulacra and hyperreality.

and the inarticulate grunts of Boris Karloff" (Airmont edition). A critic formulates the same reaction like this: "Tradition may identify a particular text with a genre even when there are relatively few formal features in common, as Shelley's *Frankenstein* has been identified with the gothic novel" (David Richter 17).[8] *Frankenstein* contains an eeriness beyond mere flamboyance or terror.

For in fact *Frankenstein* is not what it was meant to be. Both Percy's 1818 Preface and Mary's 1831 Introduction describe the occasion of its composition: the Shelleys had been reading German ghost stories with two friends, Byron and Polidori, and the group had agreed they would each write one of their own.[9] The reports are very explicit: the Preface speaks of "a story, founded on some super-natural occurrence" (8); the Introduction relates how frustrated Mary was trying to conceive "my ghost story,—my tiresome unlucky ghost story!" (180).[10] The story, beginning with the most tiresome cliché in the books ("It was on a dreary night of November"), was the "short tale" of the monster's creation that became chapter 5 in the final version of the novel. The way the rest of the novel shapes its core tale, however, is something else—something more connected and less amazing. Mary describes a process of composition aimed at constructing a plau-sible chain of events preceding and succeeding the central nightmare: "Every thing must have a beginning," she says, "and that beginning must be linked to something that went before" (178). Her three narrators—the explorer Walton who seeks a passage to the North Pole despite all physical and human resistance, the scientist Frankenstein who irresponsibly creates a living being then dishonors his solemn promise to create a partner, and the monster who lacks nurture and self-control—are emotionally disordered, but they are not mad. No grunts and galvanic flashes here.

Rather, in a spirit of logical and psychological plausibility the text repeatedly sidelines gothic models. It resists the form it was meant to exemplify. In the novel it is not Frankenstein but his childhood friend Henry Clerval who "began to write many a tale of enchantment and knightly adventure" (193; in the earlier texts he merely "wrote a fairy tale" [24]), whereas Frankenstein enjoyed a more rational upbringing: his father spared him "supernatural horrors" and he never

8   Olorenshaw also discusses the divergence of *Frankenstein* from conventional gothic. Murray showed, some two decades ago, that many gothicizing phrases were Percy's additions.

9   They were reading *Fantasmagoriana*, a mélange of eight long narratives translated from German without naming sources. These are typical *histoires galantes* with remarkable incidents, deceptions, and explained and unexplained supernatural episodes, beginning with a long, bantering tale from the popular *Volksmärchen der Deutschen* by Johann Karl August Musäus; the general tone of the volumes is close to Jane Austen's in *Northanger Abbey*. Two passages discuss the problems of explanation and evidence (1: 126-27 and 2: 264), with the overall impression being that both a modern ruse ("Le Revenant," 2: 163-224) and an ancient curse ("Les Portraits de famille," 1: 117-225) make equally improbable stories. This was a model that Shelley and the others could not have wished to imitate, only to depart from. Indeed, Rieger argues—with some point, despite the exaggerated conclusion—that there never was a supernatural story-contest (237-47).

10   See Moser for a careful deconstructive reading of the Preface and Introduction, focusing on the relationship between conception and creation. *Frankenstein* is cited from Crook's edition of the 1818 text, which gives later variants in its endnotes.

"trembled at a tale of superstition [nor] feared the apparition of a spirit" (35).[11] In boyhood, Frankenstein confesses, he envisioned "the raising of ghosts or devils" and aspired to "search [for] the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life" (26), which are the subjects of Godwin's supernatural novel *St Leon*.[12] But by the age of fifteen Frankenstein had abandoned such "ardent imagination and childish reasoning" (196; the 1818 text is different, but to similar effect) in favor of electricity and, in the 1818 text, hydraulic and steam engines. Even the "almost supernatural enthusiasm" of his quest to create life is but a methodical intensity, "not ... the vision of a madman" nor "like a magic scene" (36). When he plans to create a female monster, he prudently consults specialists to get "the information necessary for the completion of my promise" (121); and, in any case, unlike the movie versions, very little of the novel is given over to the processes or the moment of creation. Much later, after destroying the almost completed female companion, Frankenstein "walked about the isle like a restless spectre" (131), but even this figure of speech lacks the pervasive resonance of similar similes that Castle has examined in Radcliffe. Finally, near the end, when a skeptical magistrate in Geneva "heard my story with that half kind of belief that is given to a tale of spirits and supernatural events" (153), Frankenstein and Walton both insist on its truth and—more importantly for what I shall have to say later on—its consistency: it "is too connected to be mistaken for a dream" according to Frankenstein (152); in Walton's words, it "is connected, and told with an appearance of the simplest truth" (159). Arguably these characters protest too much; the novel is, for sure, unusual. Still, whatever one may say about *Frankenstein*, its monster is, assuredly, no ghost.

What then is supernatural about the plot of *Frankenstein*? Originally "supernatural" was a religious term referring to God and angels, and the religious or mythic sublime persists in discussions of the gothic novel, as in the work of Wilt and Day. Sometimes in *Frankenstein* "supernatural" does mean magical, as it regularly does in Radcliffe and Godwin, but this was still probably not the commonest sense of the term; at least, the earliest unambiguous instance of this sense recorded in the *OED* comes from Walter Scott in 1830. Until then the word seems typically to have implied exceeding rather than violating nature—in Kantian terminology, a mathematical rather than a dynamic sublime. So, at first appearance the monster is said to be "of gigantic stature" (16). At eight feet, though (indeed, "7 or eight feet" in the original manuscript [*Notebooks* 85]), we would have to call it impressive rather than titanic.[13] The monster does leap

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11 "Tale of superstition" is Percy's phrase. Mary originally wrote "ghost story," pointing even more glaringly the contrast between Frankenstein and *Frankenstein*. See Shelley, *The Frankenstein Notebooks* 75 (henceforth cited as *Notebooks*).

12 Bronfen's fine account of the relationship of *Frankenstein* to *St Leon* ("Rewriting" 24-34) leads to the conclusion that the critique of idealism ("any original sense of plenitude" [38]) in *Frankenstein* is "unambiguous" and "unequivocal" (33).

13 "Why is it a he?" asks Homans (106), eventually suggesting that the monster is androgynous. I propose that Walton's and Frankenstein's "he" tries to humanize a phenomenon they cannot face in its full alienness. Regarding them both as unreliable narrators, I use the neuter, the pronoun Frankenstein uses in the first moment of creation ("It breathed hard" [16]) and that

across vast chasms of ice and is "capable of scaling the overhanging sides of Mont Salêve" (55); it runs "with greater speed than the flight of an eagle" (110), as Frankenstein says at one place, or "with more than mortal speed" (155), as he says at another. Yet it's hard to know exactly how much to credit these turns of phrase: when wrestling with Felix De Lacey, the monster reports being grabbed "with supernatural force," yet remains confident that it could tear Felix "limb from limb" (101). Here "supernatural" clearly just means "a lot." The monster's physical accomplishments seem disproportionate even to its unusual stature, but they are supernatural only in the older and weaker sense, quantitatively impressive, not qualitatively alien.

Other aspects of the plot, however, are harder to explain, even if less flamboyant. How does the monster so infallibly track Frankenstein? Though rarely seen, it appears always to be close at hand and never at a loss for means of locomotion and transport. A single glimpse of it at a great distance leaves Walton awestruck; how, then, is it able to remain unnoticed as it follows Frankenstein to "one of the remotest" of the Orkney Islands—"a place" that is "hardly more than a rock"—and then watches over him for an extended period (126)? Similarly, at the end, the monster has passed out of sight before Frankenstein is rescued by Walton's boat: how does it know when it is being amateurishly tracked and where Frankenstein has left off? Nothing in the novel is presumed to violate the laws of nature, but there is much like this in the plotting that remains unaccountable. Food is always to be found, weather is not a problem; though early in its existence the monster sometimes suffers from the cold, later it promises to live easily in the wilds of South America, saying that its "food is not that of man" (109), and according to Frankenstein it can "exist in the ice caves of the glaciers" and possesses "faculties it would be vain to cope with" (110). A mental prodigy as well as a physical one, the monster apparently learns to manage fire without trial and error and to speak without active practice: it says it acquired French pronunciation "with tolerable ease" (86)—which is not true of babies who must practice sounds for years, and certainly not of my students—and within a few months it becomes so fluent that the blind De Lacey takes it for a native. To a great extent the monster's supernatural facility is also that of other characters. While slower than the monster, Frankenstein still claims, in the 1818 text, to have mastered English and German "perfectly," along with Latin, and to have begun to read Greek by the age of seventeen (28). Shelley's humans, like her monster, learn with astonishing ease, surmount incredible hardships, arrive at their destinations (Safie), accomplish their goals (Frankenstein), travel beyond the limits of everyday possibility (Walton), communicate across linguistic boundaries, and

Walton seems to be straining to resist following William's murder: "A flash of lightning ... discovered its shape plainly to me; its gigantic stature, and the deformity of its aspect, more hideous than belongs to humanity, instantly informed me that it was the wretch, the filthy dæmon, to whom I had given life. What did he there? Could he be ... the murderer of my brother? ... The figure passed me quickly, and I lost it in the gloom. Nothing in human shape could have destroyed that fair child. He was the murderer! I could not doubt it" (54-55). Huet says this passage "describes the monster's rebirth, his coming into the world as a human being rather than a mole," and his "newfound virility" (137). I don't see that *anything* happens to the monster here. On the female monster, see p. 161 below.

generally conclude their labors on time and on budget. Mundane normality is represented by Walton's sister, to whom his letters are addressed, and she is not heard from in the novel.

In short, *Frankenstein* is supernatural to the extent that it takes the form of a charmed world. Its representative landscapes—the far North, the high altitudes, the remotest corners of Europe—lie beyond ordinary human experience. Humans are subject to limits, as Walton perhaps is in the Arctic. But Frankenstein and his monster are different. Whereas picaresque novels travel roads and realist novels (as Stendhal famously said) learned to mirror highways, *Frankenstein*'s journeys are incipient or terminated, not in process. Even Walton's adventure proceeds by seven-league boots, with the epistolary form encouraging a record of accomplishments rather than enterprises. His first letter, from St. Petersburg, says, "I arrived here yesterday" (9); the second, from Archangel, "a second step is taken.... I have hired a vessel, and am occupied in collecting my sailors" (12); the third, "I am safe, and well advanced on my voyage" (15). He thinks his power is unbounded, "the very stars themselves being witnesses and testimonies of my triumph" (185, not in 1818). Eight feet tall is nothing. Here, in line with Walton's initial irresponsibility, megalomania meets child's play. The novel consists of situations and dramatic encounters, eliding labor and process.

The gothic of *Frankenstein* is thus defined by its disjunctness. Whatever the "consistency" of its internal narrative, the story as a whole lacks continuity. Its characters favor dark and enclosed spaces, or else they exist with a kind of sacred invisibility behind visible nature, like the monster much of the time, and like the creator in the Orkneys where he is "ungazed at and unmolested" (127). *Frankenstein*'s gothic is *in* our world and yet not *of* it.[14] And its temporality is likewise disjunctive—intermittent or repetitive, without growth and gradual change. The long months that Frankenstein spends in his library are as if out of time. To him they are "like a hurricane," in "a resistless, and almost frantic impulse," like "a passing trance" (37-38). Yet he remains incommunicado—dead to the world even in the middle of Ingolstadt. Presumably Frankenstein must eat while at work, but all that we learn is that his consuming passion ate him: it "swallowed up every habit of my nature" (38). The materials in Frankenstein's "workshop of filthy creation" (38) are a kind of anti-matter, stealthily collected from the refuse of ordinary life. This world lacks what Kant calls "reciprocity" with the ordinary world; that is, while it may follow natural laws in its own right, it doesn't participate in an exchange of qualities with ordinary matter. The monster is forced to rove at night and skulk by day; for, as Frankenstein says to it on behalf of all humans, "There can be no community between you and me" (74). Matter and anti-matter do not interact; there is no inertia or resistance governing their encounters. Either actions misfire totally, or else causes work their effects

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[14] A striking gothic example of existence that is unearthly yet within the world, natural yet seemingly supernatural, is the disembodied voice of the ventriloquist. In speaking without being seen, Charles Brockden Brown's Carwin resembles Frankenstein's monster: "I was studious of seclusion: I was satiated with the intercourse of mankind, and discretion required me to shun their intercourse. For these reasons I long avoided the observation of your family, and chiefly visited these precincts at night" (*Wieland* 224-25). Another instance—interesting because notably incidental—is Brother Nicola in volume 3, chapter 7 of Radcliffe's *Italian*.

with unregulated intensity. Frankenstein describes the monster's powers in terms of strength, but a strength that cannot be resisted really reflects an absolutism of the will; hence, the monster isn't pure physicality, as Frankenstein insinuates, but pure volition.[15] Alien to the material world, it takes no captives. Either it is reduced to blubber at the first encounter—which is what happens to it emotionally—or else it is condemned to annihilate what it meets. The book's effective axis is matter-spirit, shunning any potential pun on "Geist" and lying perpendicular to the nature-magic axis.[16]

The physical world observes quantitative laws; the supernatural appears when its nature changes. Quantity (the right number of bones, a measurable height) is converted to quality (a living soul, superhuman strength).[17] One of the book's commonest turns of phrase reflects the way a mass or heap can abruptly become an uncanny enemy. For both Frankenstein and his author have a counting problem. "Fear overcame me; I dared not advance, dreading a thousand nameless evils that made me tremble, although I was unable to define them" (53). Frankenstein's "thousand" here is his futile attempt to pretend that the nameless could somehow be computed. But it can't. The book is obsessed with failed enumeration. Here is Walton: "When my guest was a little recovered, I had great trouble to keep off the men, who wished to ask him a thousand questions; but I would not allow him to be tormented by their idle curiosity" (17). Here is Frankenstein about the teacher who stimulated his inhuman passion: "In a thousand ways he smoothed for me the path of knowledge, and made the most abstruse enquiries clear and facile to my apprehension" (201, not in 1818). Here is the monster, in sentimental vein: "If any being felt emotions of benevolence towards me, I should return them an hundred and an hundred fold; for that one creature's sake, I would make peace with the whole kind!" (108). Frankenstein on the female monster: "...she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate" (128). And in reaction to the monster's death threat: "...my imagination conjured up a thousand images to torment and sting me" (131). The delirium only increases as the book proceeds: "This suspense is a thousand times worse than the most horrible event" (139); "a thousand feelings pressed upon me.... [M]y dreams presented a thousand objects that scared me" (141); "a thousand times would I have shed my own blood, drop by drop, to have saved their lives; but I could not, my father, indeed, I could not sacrifice the whole human race" (143). The totality exceeds definition—not that the monster is measurably too big,

[15]   A related discursive account of will may be found in the report of the *Traité de la volonté* attributed to Raphaël, the protagonist of Balzac's gothic novel *La Peau de chagrin*, but then subsequently reattributed to another Balzac character, Louis Lambert, in whose novel the contents are summarized (*Louis Lambert*, in Balzac, *Oeuvres* 16: 140-50). Especially pertinent is the narrator's response, which replaces "will" with its synonym "thought": "Thus THOUGHT appeared to me like a wholly physical power, accompanied by its incommensurable generations. It was a new Humanity in another form" (16: 150, my translation).

[16]   Ferguson 105-113 takes the Kantian notion of community as the central problem of the novel, focusing on what it desires—"sociability without society" (105), "purity of selfhood" (111)—rather than on what it represents.

[17]   On the gothic conversion of quantity into sublime quality see Foucault and Liu 184-200; the topic derives from the discussions of repetition and infinity in Burke's *Enquiry*.

but that it is somehow, unaccountably, too much to grasp. It can be made, perhaps even in a sense born, but it cannot be conceived.[18]

The monster has no name because it has no one to give it a name.[19] No one, that is, stands in a natural relationship to it. Since (as part of the novel's anti-gothic struggle toward consistency) the monster yearns for its creator, it normally calls itself Frankenstein's "creature." Yet it repeatedly calls humans creatures not because it shares an identity with them, but only because it sees in them an alliance with a creator and desires the same for itself. Meanwhile, except in moments of creation, Frankenstein and the other humans variously call it monster, fiend, dæmon, and devil. Perhaps it is best just called a "being" (16, 107).[20] Or perhaps the most appropriate term is "thing"; Frankenstein uses that word next to "creature" as he is destroying the female monster (129), and his own creatureliness is destroyed in return, as he later says: "no creature had ever been so miserable as I was" (151). "No creature," not "no other creature"—at this point Frankenstein has lost his creatureliness altogether. He has become set apart, plagued.[21] That is the fate of a monster, as Mary Shelley could have learned from her father: "How unhappy the wretch, the monster rather let me say, who is without an equal; who looks through the world, and in the world cannot find a brother; who is endowed with attributes which no living being participates with him; and who is therefore cut off for ever from all cordiality and confidence, can never unbend himself, but lives the solitary, joyless tenant of a prison, the materials of which are emeralds and rubies" (Godwin 211).

Disjunct, unregulated, unbounded. No wonder the monster's skin doesn't fit. It lacks a properly positioned selfhood. Romantic philosophers taught that identities require a boundary. For Kant the issue was a boundary *between*—between consciousness and matter, subject and object, empirical and transcendent. For Fichte, perhaps more relevantly, it was an outer boundary. For him, to posit a self means to limit a will. Thoughts are free, but only the existence of an outside world confronting and limiting the thoughts can make them real. Pure self-consciousness is like a solipsistic dream verging on a life-denying nightmare. Without a proper determination, the self can *do* anything but can *accomplish* nothing, and that is precisely the dilemma of the monster at the heart of Shelley's

[18]   Cf. letter to Percy Shelley, 29.5.1817: "Why is not life a continued moment where hours and days are not counted—but as it is a succession of events happen—the moment of enjoyment lives only in memory and when we die where we are?" (sic, as if the counting problem even causes the grammatical stumbling; *Letters* 25).

[19]   On the problem of naming the monster, see Duyfhuizen.

[20]   The designation "being" may be chiefly Percy's. On one manuscript page (*Notebooks* 175) he twice inserted the name "being," first for "wretch," then for "creature," where Mary's original ("A creature whom I myself had created") suggests the derivation of the latter name from one perspective on the monster. And the published text again gives "being" following completion of the monster's long narrative where "creature" stands uncorrected in the manuscript (*Notebooks* 401).

[21]   The *OED* does not record "creature" in the sense of "monster"—Hollywood's "creature from outer space"—but one might conjecture it to derive directly from *Frankenstein*'s onomastic confusion.

novel. Its gothic is a disorder in the relationship of the self to the not-self (in Fichte's terms), of mind to body, of cause to effect.[22]

The control of causality is a crucial problem in worlds where magic reigns or where, as in *Frankenstein*, the intellect can accomplish impossible goals. The inscrutability of magic precipitates the final catastrophe of Godwin's *St Leon*, where the corrupted title character is confronted by his virtuous son: "When I consider the mystery and inscrutableness of your character, I am lost in conjecture. You are said to be a magician, a dealer in the unhallowed secrets of alchymy and the *elixir vitae*. In cases like this, all the ordinary rules of human sagacity and prudence are superseded..." (473). And the more general problem governs, for instance, Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*, which opens as follows: "The historian who would wish his lessons to sink deep into the heart, thereby essaying to render mankind virtuous and more happy, must not content himself with simply detailing a series of events—he must ascertain causes, and follow progressively their effects; he must draw deductions from incidents as they arise, and ever revert to the actuating principle" (39).[23] Shelley takes Dacre's injunction to heart. From the start Walton attributes to Frankenstein "a penetration into the causes of things, unequalled for clearness and precision" (187; the 1818 text already speaks of "causes," though more casually [19]). In preparation for creating a monster Frankenstein says he had to "examine the causes of life" and "analys[e] all the minutiæ of causation" (35-36), and in his "fervent longing to penetrate the secrets of nature" he blames "the most learned philosopher" because, "not to speak of a final cause, causes in their secondary and tertiary grades were utterly unknown to him" (195, not in 1818). And a manuscript passage in the first chapter that Mary eventually canceled contrasts Frankenstein's desire "to analyze the causes" of lightning with Henry's fancy "that the Fairies and giants were at war" (*Notebooks* 31). The highest conviction arises, as we have seen, from a narrative that is "connected."

But of course gothic narratives cannot thus perspicuously connect. They must be utterly remarkable, produced by the most surprising and inexplicable occurrences. Even in Radcliffe's novels, where the supposedly supernatural incidents are eventually explained, contingencies and frayed ends of stories abound. In *Frankenstein*, too, the marvelous is by no means limited to the monster's creation. The very next day Frankenstein uncannily prognosticates the arrival of his friend Henry Clerval, who has come searching for him: "Here I paused, I knew not why," says Frankenstein, "but I remained some minutes with my eyes fixed on a coach that was coming towards me"—the very coach carrying his friend, just past the nick of time (41). It may not be entirely a "strange chance" (155), as Frankenstein claims, when he later glimpses the monster he is pursuing, for the monster may want to tantalize him, but it is surely a product of "strange

[22]   Selfhood and its limits are the topic of DeLamotte's *Perils of the Night*; on *Frankenstein*, see 56-58.

[23]   The concern with causality pervades *Zofloya*, in numerous allusions to the "resistless influence" of a dream (223), to the "original cause" (251), and the like. *Zofloya* was a major source for the young Percy Shelley's gothic novels. Critics of the gothic rarely focus on the topic, a major exception being Todorov 109-13.

coincidences" (136) when the storm-tossed boat he has taken from the Orkneys lands precisely at the Irish village where Henry has been murdered. The monster's narrative features even more incidents of providential character that seem incompatible with the predictability of efficient causality: when it is cold it finds a fire "through accident" (78); when it has food to store it finds a wallet (79); as a reward for its good deeds it finds clothes and books (95); it learns its origin through "some papers in the pocket of the dress which I had taken from your laboratory" (97); and when it seeks vengeance, a sudden "impulse" (106) leads it to the doomed William Frankenstein, who gives himself away by blurting out his surname and who chances to be wearing the picture of his mother that the monster deposits on an innocent woman he stumbles upon, who proves to be Justine, from the same household, and who is convicted after she falls ill and a servant "happen[s] to examine the apparel she had worn on the night of the murder" (56). No wonder, after such an accumulation of improbabilities, that she is "confused" (56)! Safie locates her lover through "some papers of her father's, which fell into her hands" (94); Felix De Lacey meets Safie after having "accidentally been present" at her father's trial (214; "accidentally" is an 1823 addition). Indeed, between these coincidences and numerous other incidents there are differences more of degree than of kind. Consider, for instance, the stormy weather on the disrupted wedding night, the foundling Elizabeth's fairy tale–like origin (in the 1831 text), not to mention the happenstance of Walton's framing encounters with Frankenstein and the monster. Such accidents are hardly the stuff of a seamlessly connected and probable narrative.

Coincidence can be understood in two seemingly opposing ways. On the one hand, it is unlikely: Coincidences don't normally happen; the figures who chance to meet have no reason to be in the same place together. On the other hand, where coincidences accumulate, they suggest a world of infinite possibility. The improbable becomes the inevitable; contingency takes on the coloration of fate. Hence Freud takes the superabundance of coincidence to be one of the defining characteristics of the uncanny.[24] The terror of *Frankenstein* lies in the collapse of the antinomial categories of reason into a grotesque deformation of the order of experience. The narrative is perfectly connected with a ring of inevitability, but not with a logic humans can live by. The normal and the pathological become virtually indistinguishable. "Noble and godlike in ruin" (160), Frankenstein acquires the same Satanic tinge as the Milton-echoing monster, who "sit[s] among the ruins, and lament[s] the fall" (168). If critics cannot agree on the morality of the novel, cannot decide whose side, if any, Shelley is on, that is because of an epistemological collapse inherent in the conception of monstrosity. What is gothic about *Frankenstein* is the fact that it is not just about but is itself a monster.

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[24] "It is only this factor of involuntary repetition which surrounds with an uncanny atmosphere what would otherwise be innocent enough, and forces upon us the idea of something fateful and unescapable where otherwise we should have spoken of 'chance' only" (Freud, "The Uncanny" 144). See Clery, who writes of Radcliffe, "The bizarre coincidences that are produced to explain the supernatural are not just a technical convenience, as Scott asserted, but evidence of a higher supernaturalism that ensures that every 'accident' has its rightful place in the schema of Divine Justice" (112).

A Monster's Tale

Discussions of the monster almost always focus on its meaning for the human characters in the novel or else for the book's human author, Mary Shelley. They treat the monster, that is, as one character among many.[25] The monster does, after all, represent itself as filled with human thoughts and emotions, and the tendency to treat it as one more personage in the drama is encouraged by some critics' preference to refer to it by its self-chosen name of creature rather than by the novel's preferred, inhuman designations such as monster. But leveling with the monster remakes the book as precisely that which it can never be. If we ask instead what the monster means for the book, what it means to write a book around a monster, we focus the questions differently and, as I have been suggesting, with more specific bearing on the novel's form.[26]

By definition (and common usage in Shelley's day), a monster is a being without a place in the cosmic order. A book about a monster lacks a stable ground for experience. In *Frankenstein* none of the usual candidates for an ordering principle holds against the monster's onslaughts. Confronting a monster, religion proves witless. Religious *institutions* are represented only by the minister who coerces the innocent servant girl Justine Moritz into a false confession.[27] Religious *mores* are manifested in Islam's abhorrent treatment of women, the imprisoning harem from which the half-Turkish Safie De Lacey runs away—into the arms of the monster, as it were. And even the genuinely admirable Christian *tenets* that Safie adopts from her mother and the "brotherly love and charity" offered by the blind elder De Lacey collapse in the revulsion aroused by the sight of the monster. One glimpse of it and their life lies in ruins; while the monster takes over the language of religion, via Milton, to utter its self-recriminations: "I, like the arch fiend, bore a hell within me" (102). Nor is the social order any more dependable. Families are dysfunctional throughout the novel, and the larger social groupings remain based on denial, including locked city gates and the

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[25]   Naturally, biography naturalizes the monster; hence Mellor says, with emphasis, the "creature *is* Rousseau's natural man" (*Mary Shelley* 47). She takes the book to model the author's life, but it more plausibly represents the dilemmas of modeling. David Marshall finds the monster a light that cannot be denied rather than a Gorgon that cannot be faced; though "vision itself is frightening" (226), it nevertheless teaches a lesson, for the monster makes one see an inalienable Rousseauian bond of sympathy. Marshall overlooks the logic I have described that transmutes resemblance or quantitative gradation into absolute, qualitative difference. The monster is not the same species as us in grotesque form, nor even a different species, but no species.

[26]   Baldick shows how the concept of the monster unsettles nineteenth-century narrative and thought (including Marx). Huet argues that the book images monstrosity as the norm of (pro)creation, a heterogeneous and heterosexual process that always begets something different from its genitors. Her imaginative thematic readings cannily subdue the tragic action by emphasizing its resolution into scenes of mourning. (The biographical aspects of her essay, however, are corrected by Robinson in *Notebooks* lxix.) Favret 185-88 concerns the ubiquity of the monster as a kind of surrogate for narrative omniscience. On the meanings of "monster," see Freeman 80-82 and 87-90.

[27]   As Baldick points out, "God is mentioned in the novel only as a minor character in Milton's epic," and is invoked only by the unjustly punished Justine (42).

inhospitable Irish villagers' suspicions of English inhospitality.[28] Critics differ as to whether the monster disrupts the scheme of things or brings out the monstrosity inherent within them, but either way its story cannot be rightly told. Otherwise it would not be a monster, but merely a freak.

For, as Peter Brooks has especially made vivid, the question "What Is a Monster?" becomes equivalent to this other question: What language is adequate to a monster? The novel's problems of form are echoed by its problems of expression. When it first encounters language, the monster calls it a "godlike science" (83), but "godlike" is the word later used for Frankenstein's miscreative activity (160) and for the monster's obviously undependable judgment that humans are "all that can be conceived of noble and godlike" when they aren't "a mere scion of the evil principle" (89). The weakness of Walton (the "powerful one"), the injustice that befalls Justine, the black ballots that erroneously attest to her "blackest ingratitude" (60) all point to the proclivity of names and of language to mislead in dealing with unfathomable things. Frankenstein warns that speaking too loudly can precipitate an avalanche (72; Ferguson 105), and, as if in verification, his ensuing exclamation brings on the monster (73). Walton, who has to communicate through the defective medium of writing despite calling himself almost "illiterate" (13), is bowled over first by the eloquence of the "divine wanderer" Frankenstein (19, and similarly at 160) and then, at the end, by the monster's "powers of eloquence and persuasion" (168). But while Frankenstein, despite hating the sight of the monster, resists the monster's covering his eyes (75), Walton has to shut his eyes in order to listen to it (167), and its best listener—or true dupe—is the blind old De Lacey. Not that the monster lies. Far from it, for it speaks with the profoundest sincerity. But it speaks from a position beyond identity and hence beyond determinations of truth or falsity. Language is undone by its transcendence.

Throughout the book the monster is identified with the glaring sun (Welling). According to Frankenstein's narrative, the monster's conception is "a light so brilliant and wondrous" that "[t]he sun does not more surely shine in the heavens, than that which I now affirm is true" (36). There can be no doubt that this is the monster's light, for Frankenstein himself works in the dark, "aided only by one glimmering, and seemingly ineffectual, light" (36). Hence Frankenstein curses the light of day (75; at 130 the monster vows to make him hate "the light of day" and "curse the sun") and swears by earth and Night (154), whereas the monster swears by the sun and heaven (110) and invokes earth when cursing "the cause of my being" (104). The monster tells its story from midday to sundown (75, 110), in a hut that protects Frankenstein from the cold glare and by a fire that the monster has lighted. Frankenstein's story, while told by day, is written down at night (20). He begins his confidences "in dark gloom" and with his

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28 Speaking French, the Irish magistrate Mr. Kirwin offers kindness to the imprisoned and delirious Frankenstein, calling his country a "shore, renowned for its hospitality" (138). However, Frankenstein had heard a different tune when he landed there. "[S]urely it is not the custom of Englishmen to receive strangers so inhospitably," he complains, but is rudely answered: "I do not know ... what the custom of the English may be; but it is the custom of the Irish to hate villains" (134). Veeder attributes the failure of community, ultimately, to the persistence of unreconstructed masculine ego; see esp. 204-09.

hands shading his eyes (186—not in 1818, but the tonalities are similar), though "the starry sky" and other beauties of nature "have the power of elevating his soul from the earth" (28). Men seek to conquer the vast unknown by exploring the secrets of nature as Walton does or those of the intellectual world as Franken-stein does, but a man's reflections are "gloomy and narrow" (25) and depend upon the safety of dark and confined spaces—drifting boats or feminine domesticity.[29] A light that cannot be faced, the monster reflects back to humans their buried drives and obsessions. It is a figure of an impossible truth.

Truth (in the definition used by Kant) is the coincidence of a judgment with a perception. But the monster cannot be properly perceived because it cannot be looked at without panic, and it cannot be properly judged because it has no name with which to formulate an objective statement about it. The conflicting versions of its story, all of them disturbed, reflect the antinomy at the heart of the genre: what we know about the monster and what it knows (or feels) about itself are irreconcilable. That is the pathos of the sympathetic demon in a great many gothic novels. Nor can monstrosity be localized; it pops up in the most out-of-the-way places. Linguists might call the monster on the ice-floes a floating signi-fier, a lexeme whose meaning varies contextually. For the monster exists beyond or before language, not within it. Uncannily precocial, hardly does it stir before it walks, feeds and clothes itself, and within days it has begun to think (naturally, about cause and effect, the precipitating topic of the gothic), long before it learns about speech.[30] Thought without speech is the mental equivalent of existence without a proper body or identity without a name. In all facets of its being, the monster instantiates the limits of the thinkable. Thus does the gothic irrationality of the novel's form prove commutative with an ideological quandary. No matter how intensely the narrators desire coherence, the story refuses to take a distinct shape. The problem is not that it fails to get told; indeed, as in many gothic nov-els from *The Castle of Otranto* on, there is a plethora of tellers. Yet the monster's story defies comprehension. It becomes a threshold or limit case—an exception of dubious value in proving any rules.

The disturbance affects the moral arena most of all. The meticulous Kantian formulations of the moral imperative illuminate the problem. The moral impera-tive applies the golden rule to all like creatures, but how much likeness is requi-site? Sometimes Kant extends the principle to rational beings, sometimes to hu-manity, sometimes to nature in general. And sometimes he hedges, notably in the cardinal seventh section of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, containing the

[29] On the drifting boat as a Rousseauistic motif, see David Marshall 185-86.

[30] "How strange, I thought, that the same cause should produce such opposite effects!" And, later in the same paragraph, "I reflected on this; and, by touching the various branches, I discovered the cause" (78-79). Contrast the monster's lucidity here (beginning just above: "My sensations had, by this time, become distinct") with Frankenstein's delirium after the monster murders his bride: "[A]ll this time no distinct idea presented itself to my mind; but my thoughts rambled to various subjects, reflecting confusedly on my misfortunes and their cause" (225, 131; the first clause and the word "confusedly" were added in 1831). Condillac was evidently the philosopher who most forcefully asserted that thought depends upon language, but for Locke too thought cannot be clear if words are misused; see Aarsleff 13-43. For another discussion of knowledge and truth in the novel, see Swingle.

"Fundamental Law of Pure Practical Reason." The law is, "Act so that the maxim of your will could always count simultaneously as the principle of a general legislation" (A54), while the corollary adds a parenthetical specification to humans: "Pure reason is practical in and of itself, and gives (to men) a general law which we call the *moral law*" (A56). Are men always rational beings? Are they the only rational beings? Are they the proper subject of the moral law, contingent subjects, or mere examples of a greater good? And how is the moral law given—as an order is given, or as a gift? Kant's recourse to the uncertainty of parenthetical qualification here and elsewhere[31] points up the problem of human identity, and hence that of coexistence with a monster. How specific is the moral species? Is the monster one of us? What do we owe it, and it us?

Therefore, instead of a final dispensation, the story of a monster at the limit of the tellable concludes irresolutely, even incoherently. The legitimating epistolary frame is not only forgotten,[32] but positively dissolved into legend; as Walton says, hardly seeming to think any longer of the sister to whom his narrative is purportedly addressed, "the tale which I have detailed would be incomplete without this final and wonderful catastrophe" (166). Like all other auditors of the monster, Walton cannot look at it; he declares, "I shut my eyes involuntarily," and insists, "I dared not again raise my looks upon his face" (167). How is it, then, that between these two denials he can pretend to describe the monster's appearance and gestures: "He paused, looking on me with wonder..., and every feature and gesture seemed instigated by the wildest rage of some uncontrollable passion" (167)? The narrative loses its bearings; it ends with the absurdity of the monster imagining a glorious fiery death on a funeral pyre and then jumping onto the ice that carries it into "darkness and distance" (170). Its icy glare leaves the monster's story with an unresolved dissonance. The monster's vision of glorious extinction is self-evidently grandiose and hallucinatory. It cannot transcend its nature through a merely horizontal flight, and so it continues to besiege the imagination even in its absence. In a novel striking for the lack of an epilogue, out of sight is not out of mind. The novel's mysteries, wilfully irrational plotting, and broken form constitute a psychic rift that cannot be overcome. Monstrosity haunts the novel from within. Silly ghost stories are otherworldly dalliances, whereas *Frankenstein* projects dilemmas of coherence and comprehension that are a permanent challenge for narration. Could we be confident that the monster had escaped, we could write off the novel as escapist. But it is not. For the terror of a monster always lurking to bring home justice or revenge is a universal deformity writ large. That is why it is so easily but mistakenly allegorized into one or another material or situational problem. It implies all the cases to which critics reduce it, but remains more pervasive than any of them.

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[31]   For instance, "the subject of this determination (man)" (A15) and "the subject of this will (man)" (A87). Page numbers refer, as is conventional, to the first edition. My translations.

[32]   On the epistolary elements see Favret 176-96, a fine chapter in a powerful book.

The Monster and the Child

As befits a work of imagination, *Frankenstein*'s diagnosis is more instinctive than demonstrative; it has no explicit name for its fears. It is characteristic of literary insight to intuit an issue for which there is as yet no conceptual grasp. Literature is forever untimely in this sense; indeed, it loses its aura when it falls too comfortably within the horizon of understanding. Its meaning is a legacy for us to hunt.

Frankenstein is too anticipatory an achievement or too ancient a legend, too quick and too slow at once. The gothic novel seems perpetually out of time in this way. Here the monster's impossible funeral pyre remains an adolescent flash in the pan. And its self-congratulatory defiance perpetuates the juvenile air of all the characters. Bratty to the end, the monster will not distinguish vindication from vindictiveness.[33] Romantic gothic novels always contain elements of childish thrill, wonder, or fear. *Frankenstein* began as a game—Percy's Preface speaks of "a playful desire of imitation" (8)—and Mary's Introduction not only puts the composition under the guise of childbirth but is full of allusions to her childhood. Physically mature but less educated than "many school-boys of fifteen," Walton was raised on "day dreams" and occasional adventure tales (13), and from the start his Arctic is a fairy-tale land where "snow and frost are banished" (10). Frankenstein and his monster both idealize childhood, describe it at length and in infatuated terms, image themselves and others in the guise of children. They speak with childish bravado: "I am fearless, and therefore powerful" (130); they dream of children, yearn for children, and appear infantile to others like the Genevan magistrate who "endeavoured to soothe me as a nurse does a child" (173). Birth fantasies and womblike retreats figure prominently, as all readers recognize, but the entire perspective of the helpless mortal confronting a large and powerful figure with a poor complexion also reproduces in distorted form infantile experiences and neuroses.[34] Finally, what has rarely attracted critical notice is the infantile character of the monster's desire for a female companion. It makes its demand on Frankenstein immediately as it concludes its narrative of a double crime: first the passion and jealousy leading to the murder of William, who is portrayed as younger than he was, "a beautiful child, who came running into the recess I had chosen with all the sportiveness of infancy" (106); then the betrayal of the servant-girl Justine by planting false evidence on her. The 1831 text adds an erotic coloration to the second action, but even then only of a fairy-tale variety, evoking Prince Charming coming to his child-bride: "Awake, fairest, thy lover is near" (216, not in 1818). In the demand for a female monster, Frankenstein presumes a desire for a bride and offspring—"sexual satisfaction" in the words of one critic (Brooks 217), "monogamous wedlock with a

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[33] Veeder touches on the novel's childishness at several points, but without focusing on the topic or entering it in his elaborate index. See Veeder 85 ("analogy with childhood"), 153 (regression), 169 (Shelley's infantalization of her father).

[34] Hoeveler identifies as characteristic of Shelley's fiction "beating fantasy, expressing the child's ambivalence and impotence when confronted with the power and mystery of the parental figures" (160). Her subchapter (153-83) focuses on *Mathilda* and makes only brief mention of *Frankenstein*. Consult the index for many other discussions of beating fantasies throughout the book.

complementary mate" according to another (Veeder 212).[35] Yet what the monster actually says is this: "Shall each man ... find a wife for his bosom, and each beast have his mate, and I be alone?" (130). Since it is neither man nor beast, the only literal content of the complaint here is the deprivation of companionship. Sexual feelings are evoked, according to the language that the monster has learned, but attenuated throughout, hence the homosexual overtones often found within the heterosexual discourse. (Indeed, might not the sailor Walton understand "mate" to mean a shipmate, and a child understand it as a playmate?)[36] But the monster's first model of a blissful existence is the threesome of blind father (and in covering Frankenstein's eyes before narrating his history, the monster restages the situation of old De Lacey listening to its story), son, and daughter, who is called the "companion" of both her father and her mother (81, 82); and in William the monster had fantasized and then lost a playmate, "my companion and friend" (106). From its new female "companion" (the same word used for William), it seeks "sympathy"—a word that often characterizes same-sex friendship—and "the affections of a sensitive being" (110), echoing language that Walton's second letter uses to and of his sister Margaret. Sharing a begetter, the two monsters would be siblings, and nothing in Percy's ideology of love allows a neat separation of sexual from fraternal emotions.[37] It is notable that at the very moment when it demands a "creature of another sex" the monster repeatedly insists that it is nothing like "man" (109). For while the monster is large, its skin is "shrivelled" (40): it remains emotionally stunted, neither growing up, successfully separating itself from its daddy, nor finding a home. Even if it desires a bride, in other words—and Frankenstein's narrative puts it in that way before the monster does and less ambiguously—the incestuous passion would preserve its infantile character.[38]

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[35] Brooks's discussion (unlike Veeder's) makes clear that the presumption of sexual desire is Frankenstein's mistake; he sees that the issue lies in a deeper, primal narcissism, and he goes on to discuss gender ambiguity: "the Monster never is given the chance to function sexually, and we are never given a glimpse of those parts of the body that would assure us that he is male" (219). While demonstrating aspects of infantilism in the monster, Brooks does not proceed to the converse claim made in this essay, that the novel represents infancy as monstrous.

[36] On the homosexual overtones, see Ketterer 56-65, a book rich in observations on a variety of topics, and Veeder 88, 120-23. Also insightful on the monster's uncertain gender identifications are Day and Wolfson.

[37] See Daffron, who lucidly highlights strains of same-sex emotion and eroticism in Frankenstein and in Walton, though he neglects similar hints about the monster, concerning whom he says only, "the monster imagines a life sharing with another—a life that need not exclude children but nevertheless does not find its fulfillment in reproduction" (428). Joseph is the one critic who argues more directly for a nonsexual thrust in the novel.

[38] May is the only critic I have noted to say (though with little elaboration) that the monster wants a sister (675), in a regressive novel where "time reverses itself" (679). In attributing the fantasy of reproduction to Victor rather than the monster, I am preceded by McLane 975-79. Copjec argues that Frankenstein proves himself a bad mother by taking the monster literally, seeing "a demand for a sexual relation" in its long speech (43). Copjec is insightful about the problem, but wrong about where it lies: as I have suggested, Frankenstein doesn't stick to the letter of the monster's speech. In their excellent discussion of the anxieties of motherhood in

The infantile and primitive character of the gothic seems to me its most distinctive contribution to the history of the human imagination.[39] It is simultaneously terrifying and playful; indeed, most gothic novels from the romantic period either arise out of a spirit of play, centrally concern wagering, or else include incidental episodes of game or diversion, like Valancourt's temporary addiction to gambling late in Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* or the tennis match at which the demonic Robert Wringhim first taunts George Colwan early in James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. Roughly contemporaneous with the development of the literary fairy tale, gothic narratives differ from them in being written not *for* children but as if from within their sensibility. What distinguishes the gothic, thus understood, has little to do with the marvelous; Swift's Gulliver, after all, explores reaches as remote as Walton's, encounters physical, moral, emotional, and scientific monsters, finds himself in situations of immense power and utter weakness, has a vision of the end of the human race, and goes mad, yet the experience of reading *Gulliver's Travels* is totally unlike that of reading *Frankenstein*. Rather, the sensibility of the gothic arises from its exceptionally undirected and unregulated emotions. Adults play by the rules, but children allow games to get out of hand, with an intensity of involvement that puts them, in Hogg's fine phrase, "beyond sport" (22).[40] In the gothic, fathers and other authority figures conduct themselves with the peremptoriness of little children, yet they remain as futile as any neighborhood bully. And if Frankenstein roves, so too do William, Justine, Safie, Walton, all under the sign of the monster who becomes an all-embracing figure for the childishly unregu-

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the novel, Gilbert and Gubar appear to fall just wide of the mark on this point when they say, "the female monster Victor half-constructs in Scotland will be a more than sister as well as a mater to the monster, since both have the same parent/creator" (*Madwoman* 228). On the other hand, Mishra exceeds the textual evidence in describing the murder of Frankenstein's bride Elizabeth Lavenza as a rape, though, to be sure, an "unrepresentable" one (222-23). A more exact reader, with less of an explanation of the difference between what the text says and what she finds implied in it, says the "murder is almost explicitly presented as a form of rape" (Clemens 103).
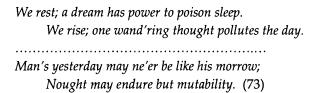
[39] Mellor, *Mary Shelley* 38-51, illuminates the novel's portrayal of children's feelings and its stance toward education, but bypasses the novel's representation of the immature childish understanding of the world.

[40] Ellis 181-206 idealizes children and childish emotions in *Frankenstein*. Presenting the novel as a "critique of the family" (185), she says that Shelley's "optimistic feminism" embodies in Safie the "domestic affection" that Victor "refuses to let the monster have" (203). I would agree if I thought the novel held out the hope that we could be infant, child, and adult all in one. Likewise dependent on an idealization of childhood are Maggie Kilgour's attributions of successful or failed triadic patterns to gothic plots: "The gothic both represents and distorts the Romantic artist's attempt to recover an earlier stage of individual development, childhood, which is idealised, like the gothic middle ages, as a time of symbiotic unity and oneness with the world before the alienation of adulthood set in" (36). She recognizes that "Victor's childhood, like all childhoods, is clearly not as perfect as he remembers in retrospection" (202), but, to my mind, blurs the outlines by remaining insufficiently suspicious of his narration.

lated spirit. Characters are alternately babyish and babied, magisterial, manipulative, and furtive.[41]

The childish feelings portrayed in gothic novels are the determinants of behavior, yet they lack determinacy, with love inseparable from hate, need from desire; that is why the fixing of blame can become such an endless sport for critics. The gothic sublime confuses the self with the objects of its perceptions; in "the glorious presence-chamber of imperial Nature," as the 1831 text calls it (212), the grandeur of the landscape simultaneously overwhelms and consoles; it is alien yet allied and even subject to the self. In a dream Frankenstein sees the Alps "congregated round me"; they are there as if to serve him, yet when he awakes they are covered in mist, "so that I even saw not the faces of those mighty friends" (212-13). As duplicitous as Kirwin or as Alphonse Frankenstein, the landscape is both near and remote, enveloping and forbidding, projection and boundary of the self.

The mind that cannot disentangle (Freud's term is "de-fuse" [*entmischen*]) either its perceptions or its emotions is the slave of the world it dreams of mastering. The terror of the monster is that of a calculation gone awry. As multiplication turns exponential, and as the more-than-natural proves transcendental, the child confronts the powerlessness of a supposedly all-powerful imagination. In leaving for the university Frankenstein staked his bets on conquering nature through mastering scientific rationality; he speaks insistently of a child's ardor to prove himself and "enter the world" (31). But his control of material causality is defeated when greater purposes combine overwhelmingly, as wind and weather cooperate with the monster to work his demise. The external world becomes the reserve of an energy almost as nameless as the monster itself. An inexplicable teleology subjugates the freedom we feel within us to a controlling fate, rendering what seemed malleable as hard as ice and what seemed predictable as capricious as a mountain storm. At the height of his mountain ecstasy, just before the monster appears, Frankenstein—whose very name, "freestone," epitomizes the antinomies of the gothic—quotes the last eight lines of Percy Shelley's sonnet "Mutability," thereby allowing his and Mary Shelley's alter ego to describe what the world feels like to the uncomprehending child:

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[41]   Even so peripheral a figure as the Irish magistrate Kirwin exemplifies the inscrutable instability of character. At his introduction he appears "calm and mild," yet "with some degree of severity" (135). He proceeds to torment Frankenstein with the abrupt sight of Clerval's corpse, which results in two months of helpless delirium. When Frankenstein starts to recover, Kirwin re-emerges with "sympathy and compassion" (138), but when Frankenstien shies, he again trifles with Frankenstein's feelings, offering an unnamed "friend" and reacting with summary judgment—"a troubled countenance ... a presumption of my guilt, ... rather a severe tone" (139). Frankenstein covers his eyes as if Kirwin or the unknown friend were the monster, and Kirwin accuses him of rejecting his father before Frankenstein could know who is there. (Yet Frankenstein could hardly expect the arrival of his father, who had earlier been spared from attending to Frankenstein's even longer illness in Ingolstadt on account of his "advanced age, and unfitness for so long a journey" [43].) So much for the "renowned ... hospitality" (138) of the Irish!

> *We rest; a dream has power to poison sleep.*
> *We rise; one wand'ring thought pollutes the day.*
>
> ....
>
> *Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow;*
> *Nought may endure but mutability.* (73)

Frankenstein, then, is just as horrible as it seems. It plays with our sensibilities, like a child's game from the loser's perspective. To reduce the gothic to the status of imaginative fantasy is not an adequate response to the complexity of the novel. Yet it is not horrible in the ways that it often seems. While it does not forecast a triumphantly Nietzschean extravagance, it does lie beyond good and evil in the negative sense that it invalidates the moral questioning supporting ideological readings. In other books murder and mayhem may be subject to restorative justice or redemptive religion, but *Frankenstein* has a dark abyss at its core (Stewart 113-32) and its sequence of homicides points at the heart of Alphonse, the father and alpha, original of all things (Veeder 152-53). The monster is inescapable because it emerges from within all of us. *Frankenstein* portrays an essential even though invisible reality. Shelley's "monster-child," as Alan Richardson has termed it, embodies the monstrosity that her novel intuits at the core of childhood.[42]

All the passions in *Frankenstein* are unregulated. Parental figures are either brutal or inconceivably tender, fraternal relations loving in impulse and suffocating in outcome, loves doomed, social organization a perversion of reason, justice, and hospitality. The tellers—guilty victims all—cannot possibly make sense of a world so far out of control, subject to both natural and cultural forces of the utmost pervasiveness and unpredictability. The "powerful" Walton, the "free" Frankenstein, and the nameless monster all see their worlds from a position of helplessness. Desperately, if irrationally, they want both to join and to escape. As frame figure, Walton leaps from a "land of angels" in the West to a town called Archangel in the northeast, from the "Paradise of my own creation" he has dreamed to the "country of eternal light that he seeks" (11, 10); he cannot or will not cope with the Middle Earth of civil life and mature responsibility.[43] Nor will the novel as a whole, in its actions, its narrative incongruities, the mishmash of

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[42] "Her monster-child's unnatural physical autonomy (he learns to feed himself in a few hours and can soon find fuel and shelter on his own) only underscores his need for the 'irrational' nurture which, as an abandoned infant, he is denied, eventually falling victim to an intense and compulsive hatred which inversely mirrors the love and sympathy that he has desperately and unsuccessfully pursued" (Richardson 34). This admirable summary misses only the way in which a physical unnaturalness equates to a psychic inevitability—every small child's *Größenwahn*—and so mistakes a universality for a special pathology. Yousef offers a clear and insightful account of the monster as child, in relation to empiricist pedagogy.

[43] Claridge, who best characterizes parent-child relations in the novel, distinguishes the unloved children Frankenstein and his monster from Walton, who (she says) responsibly turns back toward society at the end. If the novel offers closure and mature resolution, then this is it, but the case remains unproven.

its form. It shows us, rather, what the rest of us have escaped from in growing up.

There have always been children. But there has not always been childhood, at least not as a state of mind. Norbert Elias deduced from studying conduct books that adults in eras before the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were no more "civilized" than children: "The degree of restraint and control over drives expected by adults of each other was not much greater than that imposed on children. The distance between adults and children, measured by that of today, was slight" (120).[44] Latin made do with three approximations: *infans* for the helpless young, *liberi* for offspring, and most commonly *puer*, a son (or, by extension, child generally) as a social condition. The last equates with the normal Greek term, παῖς, which is set off against babyhood only by a neuter diminutive, παιδιον. Likewise in German (until the late English import, *das Baby*—itself originating as a diminutive of "babe" that, according to the *OED*, was only gradually restricted to infancy), the neuter *Kind* covered the whole range of experiences and conditions through adolescence, and the situation is little different in the Romance languages. To be sure, it was possible to think of childhood as a class; this is Aries's well-known thesis.[45] Increasingly, too, and more in line with *Frankenstein*, is a sense of childhood as a separate race, implicated in all the utopian or colonialist feelings about "natives" throughout the world.[46] The word "child" itself tended to shade off into a servant, slave, or primitive. But that usage gradually grew outmoded, as childhood increasingly came to be viewed as a state within rather than a condition outside adult humanity. Whatever its much-debated resonance, Wordsworth's "The child is father to the man" conveyed an inherence that could no longer allow childhood to be regarded as something to be outgrown or left behind. Romantic idealization dematerialized childhood, so that it was no longer a place but only an aura. Only then, in Mary Shelley's era, did the child become a vision. As Judith Plotz puts it, "Sometimes produced through retrospective reclamation of the self embalmed within, sometimes constructed as a sequestered pastoral solitary, the Romantic child serves as a buffer against the vicissitudes of the public sphere. By *growing down*, the adult can insulate himself as a child self from the shocks of history, and also ally himself in fellowship with true timeless childhood, thus blotting out the actual contemporary ugliness of child exploitation" (39, Plotz's italics).

[44] For his theoretical generalization on the topic, see Elias 153-54: "The problems relating to the child's consciousness and drive-economy vary with the nature of the relations of children to adults" (153). He determined that the word "civilization," which distinguishes adults from children, emerged in France only in the 1760s (and, according to the *OED*, in the following decade in England); see 33-34 and the associated note on 519.

[45] "The concept of the separate nature of childhood, of its difference from the world of adults, began with the elementary concept of its weakness, which brought it down to the level of the lowest social strata" (Aries 262).

[46] In the *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College* Thomas Gray calls children "a sprightly race," who should be sheltered in "their paradise," though condemned eventually to endure all the torments of "men." For a good overview of the topic of childhood as a race see Myers, and on the encounter of the human race with others, see Laura Brown 221-65.

We have become accustomed to regarding the romantic child as an image of unspoiled, untainted perfection. Rousseau was, of course, the greatest promoter of such an ideal, at least in theory. Its most recent and outspoken proponent has been James Kincaid, who would like to make children out of all of us by ridding us of our adult anxieties; childhood for him is "a melancholy fix on a golden time that we all slip away from" and that we should really hold onto (51). Kincaid's book aims to evacuate all cultural fears by ventilating them. "The standard narrative manages to package all the horror gothic-style, fashioning an Outsider as monster and thus protecting us from the more knowing shadow-stories of incest and the seduction of children by those who are loved and trusted." He wants to "tell the story of the story" by "speak[ing] what is marginal and unspeakable": "Deconstructing the story we love to tell and believe, the story of the monster does give us a glimpse of another tale to tell" (357). Maybe in the longest run he is right in thus reinstating the most ardently innocent kind of romanticism. But it cannot be done without confronting the sources of the stories of childhood terror.

Judith Plotz's new book suggests rifts within the romantic idealization of childhood. She discusses Wordsworth, for instance, under the title, "More Clouds Than Glories: Wordsworth and the Sequestered Child," moving from the projection of the child of nature to a glimpse of the triumph of children over parents; "Charles Lamb and the Child Within" culminates in "innocent guilt"; "Little Mr. De Quincey and the Affliction of Childhood" moves from fraternal sado-masochism toward adult anorexia; finally, "The Case of Hartley Coleridge: The Designated Genius," portrays an adorable and adored, self-conscious and self-centered, irresponsible child who grows into a failed adult. The beautiful child never came without its costs.

Other studies, from other perspectives, touch more or less systematically on the dark sides of the little angels of the house, or as Reinhard Kuhn titles his plot-oriented literary survey, *Corruption in Paradise*. U. C. Knoepflmacher has beautifully outlined Victorian literary disquiets with the Wordsworthian child. The social history of children in 19th-century Britain contrasts the glorious ideals with the hard Victorian realities of early death, punishment, poverty, and crime (Walvin). An elegant anthropological study of "the wild child" throughout history acknowledges the lawlessness attaching to fairy-tale and utopian images (Dieter Richter). Most surprisingly pertinent, perhaps, is Giorgio Agamben's *Infancy and History*, a mixture of Heideggerian philosophy and Lévi-Straussian ethnography that illuminates the position of children at the peripheries of acculturation. Agamben meditates upon the destabilizing boundary between nature and culture, silence and speech (the book was conceived as a prelude to a work to be called "The Human Voice"), ritual play and historical development, hot and cold societies. Children are the uncanny shifters breaking through limits and thus permitting evolutions. Hence for him they are intrinsically gothic, like ghosts in the flesh: "If the ghost is the living-dead or the half-dead person, the baby is a dead-living or a half-alive person. It too, as tangible proof of the discontinuity between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and between diachrony and synchrony, and as an unstable signifier which can, at any

moment, be transformed into its own opposite, thereby represents both a threat to be neutralized and a means of enabling the passage from one sphere to the other without abolishing its signifying difference.... Ghosts have a corresponding function to that of children" (Agamben 83). Something about childhood haunts all adult or civilized views of its unfettered joys; Agamben, as if echoing Percy Shelley, calls it the alastor, or wanderer impulse, "the spectre of the unburied" (82).

Mostly, the nineteenth century papered over the unsettling nature of childhood. Kant's *Anthropology* has a strange paragraph right at the start about children as little tyrants, compelling adoration through torturing the sounds of the language, but the typically interminable sentence drifts into a paean to the unfettered joys of childhood games. Dickensian children come notoriously in all flavors, from redeemed to fallen, but the former are the true children, while the latter appear modeled on adult exploiters. Tom and Maggie Tulliver incarnate the impulsive, heartless, refractory impulses besetting all humans in an oeuvre where only visionaries, saints, and martyrs are truly mature, but their roots are explored only beginning with pre-adolescence and not with the more repressed and incalculable drives of infancy. Only toward the end of the century do the terrors of inveterate childish wildness or childhood terrors come to dominate figures like Hardy's Father Time (the child-murderer of *Jude the Obscure*) or the doomed innocents of James's "Turn of the Screw." And only with the second of Freud's *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex* is there a systematic account of what Freud calls the polymorphous perversity of childhood and an explicit statement that "cruelty [*Grausamkeit*—a gothically tinged word] is especially near the childish character" (Freud 53).

In the light of romantic-period accounts of childhood and their subsequent evolution, gothic plots take on a decisive importance. The issues are voiced throughout the genre: one may think, among countless others, of the account of the Prince's childhood at the opening of book 2 of Schiller's *Ghost-Seer* or the womblike cave and fears of burial alive into which the persecuted son Vivaldi stumbles in chapter 7 of Radcliffe's *The Italian*. And wild children abound, such as Goethe's Mignon and Kleist's Käthchen von Heilbronn. But no work focuses so insistently yet so deviously as *Frankenstein* on the terrors of the unsocialized.[47] As this essay has shown, the capriciousness of the novel and of all the characters within it are the core, not the frame, of its experience. The sublime threats from without—whether from magic, from science, from familial or social patriarchy, from the natural or the sexual or the supernatural sublime—are reflexes of the uncomprehending instability and powerlessness of the child. Without introducing infants as human characters in the novel and thus without thematizing childhood as merely one allegorical topic among others, Shelley's novel accomplishes

[47]   Perhaps that is why Steedman's study omits *Frankenstein* despite professing to have been provoked by it (she says both things in her Preface, ix). Despite its span from Goethe's Mignon to Freud, her book is a medley of the physiology, dramaturgy, and sociology of childhood, deflecting psychology onto "the point where Wilhelm sees a real child and recognises her, in the social world of the novel" (158) and climaxing in a critique of Kincaid for omitting "evidence" that pedophilia is abusive (167). There is indeed no place for *Frankenstein* in work oriented toward "the search for the child" Mignon, "as she really was" (158).

the feat of expressing the perversity of childhood while masking the nature of its insights under the veil of a silly "ghost story" or "hideous phantom." Only thus could its bitter pill be swallowed.[48]

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