Frankenstein and Dis(re)membered Identity

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1. Dis(re)membering Identities and Texts

Frankenstein elucidates a story about the subject which does not correspond to Frankenstein's intentions: the creature does not turn out as Frankenstein had envisioned him. In making the self first through his project of creating the creature and then through his narrative enterprise, Frankenstein fabricates a fictional other, several steps removed from originary signification. The creature, as the excess in identity, fractures Frankenstein's wish to create a creature in his likeness. Frankenstein desires to re-member his identity after the death of his mother by creating the creature; when this project fails, however, he turns to narrative to re-member his life. The re-membering of identity and text founders; Shelley shows that attempts to construct a composite text and subject are fictions to be dismantled. Narrative in this text is divided among three narrators: Walton, Frankenstein, and the creature. This diffusion of narrative voice indicates that the narrative body is not whole, incapable of reproducing a sutured narrative about the origins of one's life. Narrative moves from one subject to another: Frankenstein tells the story of the creature, and Walton writes down Frankenstein's tale. The subject cannot present itself directly: it does so through the screen of another voice, so to speak. Other voices and texts take over and rewrite the narrative one posits of one's life. The frame narrative thus disturbs the notion of unitary identity, on which the notion of autobiography has rested.

The coexistence of the body and narrative in *Frankenstein* also entails a consideration of the feminine voice in narrative. The creature reflects a dismembering of Frankenstein's subjectivity; similarly, I will contend that Shelley's fictional self in the introduction to the 1831 edition of the novel mirrors her alienated position in narrative. The feminine subject is in the position of the creature, the ultimate "other" in the text. In constructing an "I" that is bound to the laws of representation (and to the displacement that results in another subject), Shelley presents an "I" that does not correspond to a unique feminine voice. This idea sets the stage for an understanding of her autobiographical account in the introduction: Shelley's version of her own subjectivity depicts a figure encased in representations of woman; simultaneously, she projects a subject that resists that placement through the techniques of parody. Taking into account the disharmony of the subject in the

main text, one can argue that the feminine subject in the introduction engenders a fresh conception of the feminine body in narrative. It will be my contention that in the introduction Shelley returns the look of the gaze, thereby not formulating a text that accords with masculinist desires. She resuscitates the dead voice or body of the traditional narrative of woman, and in its place creates a feminine voice or body that speaks in many different voices, thereby upsetting the notion of a single feminine identity.

A recapitulation of Lacan's mirror stage will pave the way for an understanding of the subject, its fictions, and reconstructions in *Frankenstein.* As Marc Eli Blanchard points out, "The proper autobiography . . . aims at the re-creation of a primal mirror stage" (99). This primal mirror stage involves the subject looking into the mirror and mistakenly seeing a reflected, whole image. *Frankenstein* is concerned with the story of origins, with a myth of origins that would replay a fantasy of self-generation, which is the aim of autobiography. Looking into the mirror, the autobiographer is seduced into thinking that the image reflects himself or herself completely. Frankenstein achieves this desire of self-generation through the creation of the creature, who is without "natural" origins. Ironically, however, the creature is made up of several different body parts, subverting the idea of unique self-generation. His other project—his narrative one—depicts Frankenstein's wish to shore up the fractured image he sees in the mirror.

Similar to Narcissus looking at himself in the mirror, where he mistakenly thinks that what he sees reflects his being, in "The Mirror Stage" Lacan tells us that the infant subject misrecognizes itself by assuming that the coalesced subject image in the mirror corresponds to the subject's "I." When Frankenstein looks into the mirror of his image, however, he sees that the creature's

> limbs were in proportion, and [he] had selected his features as beautiful. 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 pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his 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. (105)

In this scene, which depicts the awakening of Frankenstein's creature, Frankenstein no longer can control the other in the "I." He looks into the mirror of his subjectivity and sees a discontinuous image, which he does not want to claim as his.[1] The creation scene in *Frankenstein* copies Lacan's mirror stage, the subject's confrontation with his mirror image, but Shelley refuses to suture the split in the "I"; the subject remains fractured. Lacan goes on to explain that the body image the child sees in the mirror reflects back a wholeness, but underlying this wholeness is the fragmented body, which, as he also tells us, "usually manifests itself in dreams when

the movement of the analysis encounters a certain level of aggressive disintegration of the individual" (4).

Frankenstein startlingly shows that identity is a fiction to shore up the dismemberment of the "I." The creature, as the reflection of Frankenstein, reveals that dismemberment is at the basis of subjectivity and that the mirror image fails to create a composite image. Shelley fractures identity by underscoring the fissured and profoundly split subject. In doing so, she uncovers the "fictionality" behind the subject's apprehension of itself as whole in the mirror stage. Lacan explains the subject's misrecognition in the mirror stage:

> The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation—and which manufactures for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic—and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development. (4)

The Lacanian subject, in a sense, seeks to uphold the fictionality of the unity he or she sees in the mirror. But the creature in *Frankenstein* surfaces as the return of the repressed: the dismembered or fragmented self that cannot be incorporated into a fictional unity. Much like Frankenstein, the creature, too, reverses Lacan's proposition that the subject sees a unified image in the mirror, for the creature confronts his specular image when he narrates: "How was I terrified when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror" (159). Instead of coalescing the fragmented self, the mirror here accentuates the creature's alienation from himself; the text thus lifts the veil from the fictionality of representation that traditionally seeks to suture identity.

Frankenstein begins his project of creating the creature by proclaiming his wish to create a corresponding creature: He desires to "attempt the creation of being like [him]self" (101). The *Frankenstein* text, however, quickly moves away from this representational model, elucidating the failure of a one-to-one correspondence. The text articulates the misfiring of representation by presenting its own creation scene about multiple subjectivities and competing identities as Frankenstein brings the creation into being. The text poses the question: how can one represent the self to the self and have it conform to one's intentions? The creature asks the questions: "Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?" (174), as if to echo Frankenstein's search for the origins of life: "Whence . . . did the principle of life proceed?" (99). As *Frankenstein* points out, these questions become unanswerable, since once one begins the work of self-representation, one is subject to another text, another story, and another self.[2]

Frankenstein's project of creating a creature in his image shows the effects of language as it moves along the signifying chain. As Frankenstein begins the project of self-representation, he comes face to face with the contingency of language's effects: the created will be a stand-in, never equal to his conscious intentions. When Frankenstein views the just-born creature, the text reveals the gap between Frankenstein's intentions and the result. He begins his project by thinking that the signifier can represent the signified. But the creation scene—which depicts Frankenstein's horror at his handiwork—indicates the sliding of the signifier under the signified. Lacan points out that Freud's work on dreams "shows us in every possible way that the value of the image as signifier has nothing whatever to do with its signification" (159). This distortion in the dream text and in the project of representation demonstrates the displacement involved in self-representation. The subject in representing himself or herself veers off in signification and produces another subject.

The creature as the representational object symbolizes the death of presence; the body of the creature is a hybrid text, made up of countless other bodies without any definitive origins. In this text about self-representation, Shelley articulates the idea that the notion of the subject is not a single one positing any one definitive meaning or message; rather, the subject is multiple and shifting. Moreover, by having Frankenstein reassemble the creature from dead bodies (he "collect[s] bones from charnel houses and disturb[s] with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the human frame" [102]), Shelley also reconstructs and reassembles a new idea of the body. That is to say, she fashions a body without a center or origin of meaning. Thus, the text collapses what subjectivity has meant in the Western tradition. Descartes had posited a direct correlation between consciousness and language, thereby strengthening the concept of a unified subject. But by producing a body without an original unity, Shelley collapses Western logos. For by exhibiting a new notion about the body, the text allows for a novel formulation of the "I." Descartes had placed man at the center of the universe by virtue of his voice being continually present to itself. A decentered body challenges Descartes' view by suggesting that multiple voices and bodies speak the "I." Frankenstein and the creature share paradoxically a reciprocal identity as well as an alienating one. Frankenstein explains: "I considered the being whom I had cast among mankind and endowed with the will and power to effect purposes of horror . . . nearly in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave and forced to destroy all that was dear to me" (124). This uncanny relationship between the creature and Frankenstein reveals the notion of the "I" to be a complicated field of multiple subjectivities and competing identities.

Dis-membering the body from a unique "I," Shelley's text demonstrates how autobiographical narrative falls into the realm of the monstrous; according to Claude Levesque in *The Ear of the Other*, in fact, "[T]o tell one's own story is to

consort with the terrifying" (72). The frightening in *Frankenstein* entails Frankenstein's horror at the contingency of his existence as he creates his image and his narrative enterprise. Just as the frame narrative precludes one unique identity, the gaze of the creature permits a leakage in Frankenstein's identity, something that he cannot abide. What is so frightening about the creature is that he returns the look. Prior to his opening his eyes, he had been the object of Frankenstein's gaze, but at the creation scene, Frankenstein sees "by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light . . . the dull yellow eye of the creature open[ed]; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs" (105). Then, Frankenstein abruptly exclaims: "How can I explain my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form" (105). This sudden change in Frankenstein's tone defies explanation, especially when he adds that "[the creature's] limbs were in proportion, and [he] had selected his features as beautiful" (105). But as the produced swiftly takes on a life of its own, the creation scene elucidates another feature of language—that moment of lack experienced at the subject's entry into the symbolic, when words stand in for the original object (the mother). The eye/look in this scene represents division, or lack, which incorporates the divorce between signifier and signified. It is the look, then, that makes apparent the subject's division from the mother, in that the returned look suggests another subjectivity, which marks Frankenstein's entry into the symbolic, setting up his lack and desire.

The terror Frankenstein feels from the reciprocal gaze of the creature represents his horror at becoming a subject. The creation scene recapitulates the origins of the subject's entry into the symbolic where words become the stand ins for objects. The creature would then denote the disjunction in Frankenstein's subjectivity, reflecting his otherness, his split from the mother. Frankenstein wishes to be the originator of his own life and the body of the creature; he wants to control the look, so to speak. Laura Mulvey explains Freud's work on the gaze: "He associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling, and curious gaze" (59). While Frankenstein wishes his creation to remain under his control, the creature, like Medusa, looks back and brings the chain of lack into play. Frankenstein desires that the creature be the spectacle; he works for almost two years on the forming of the creature, Frankenstein's "eyeballs starting from their sockets in attending to the details of [his] employment" (102). He is locked in a narcissistic gaze with the creature. During this time of the assembling of the creature, Frankenstein's paradoxical desire is for the creature to remain the object of the gaze—in a sense, to be inert—and yet to come to life. This ambiguous desire reflects both the child's accomplishment at sending the mother away himself in Freud's elaboration of the *fort/da* game,[3] thereby bringing her under his control, and the child's wish to be locked in a narcissistic dyad with the mother before the advent of language.

Further, prior to the creation scene, another fantasy is enacted: Frankenstein is in control of the gaze initially; therefore, he occupies the position of the masculine subject, who, typically in our culture, possesses the power to look and to define; while the creature, the female in the fantasy, functions as the object of the gaze. As numerous critics have pointed out, Frankenstein's project is a masculinist one;[4] he, along with the avatars of his profession, wishes to "penetrate into the recesses of nature and show how she works in her hiding-places" (96). Additionally, the "most learned philosopher had . . . partially unveiled the face of Nature, but her immortal lineaments were still a wonder and a mystery" (88) for him to discover. In these passages, Frankenstein is the subject who will control the experiment; the creature serves as the object of the gaze, whom Frankenstein will formulate according to his desires. By this gendering of Frankenstein and the creature, I mean to suggest the power relationship that the look establishes.

The female who returns the look replays in fantasy the fear of castration. Freud explains this point when he writes: "The terror of Medusa is . . . a terror linked to the sight of something, namely, the female genitals, which confirm the existence of human beings supposedly 'castrated' " ("Medusa's Head" 273). The creation scene reenacts the scene of castration where the look serves to paralyze the male. The creature is reminiscent of the Medusa, physically, for his fragmented body parts may be seen as a representation of the lack embodied in the castrated female. Frankenstein's description of the creature—quoted above—centers on a catalogue of his body parts, with an emphasis on the creature's face ("lustrous" hair, "pearly" teeth, "watery" eyes, "shrivelled" complexion). In reducing the creature to a catalogue of body parts that do not harmonize, however, Frankenstein produces a subjectivity that is "other" the moment it awakens into consciousness, the moment that it looks; for as the text suggests, until the moment of its awakening the creature is "beautiful" (105).

Frankenstein fears being controlled by the image, of being captured in the gaze of the other: gazing at the Medusa would result in a man turning to stone. Because the image upsets the "coherent" subjectivity that he has set up for himself, Frankenstein tries to abjure the otherness that the creature denotes. Now that he has finished the creation, he relates that the "beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled [his] heart" (105). Lacan links the gaze with the "evil eye" and witchcraft, and the passage above in which the creature gazes at Frankenstein is significant in that it focuses on the eye of the creature and the subsequent terror it inspires in Frankenstein. Teresa de Lauretis extends our understanding of this gaze when she writes: "Medusa's power to cast the spell which in many cultures is actually called the 'evil eye,' is directly represented in her horribly 'staring eyes,' which are a constant feature of her figurative and literary representations, while the serpents in their hair . . . are a variable attribute of all three Gorgons" (110). That the creature stares back at Frankenstein signifies the split in

the "I" of Frankenstein, since it is through the creature's eyes that the "I" of Frankenstein unravels. Immediately after the creature returns the look, Frankenstein's narrative splinters apart hysterically, unable to contain his ambivalent feelings. The gaze of the creature, then, represents the otherness involved in achieving a subject position. One is always another, capable of reflecting a different subjectivity.

The frontispiece to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*[5] captures the terror that the gaze evokes in the spectator. Frankenstein has just gazed on the scene of the awakening creature, and Frankenstein's eyes bulge as if they cannot abide the creature's look. The frontispiece depicts an after scene of the gaze that inspires terror and dread. Stephen Heath has explained that the returned look is "from the place of the other," which disrupts the sense of wholeness in the subject ("Difference" 88). Additionally, for Frankenstein, to lose the power of the look means to be subject to a series of narrative events that cannot be predicted, as will be his fate in the text. The creature steals the look and, in doing so, usurps the power of representation from Frankenstein. That Frankenstein's text cannot explain the difference between what the creature looked like before his animation and afterwards, is related to the function of Frankenstein's being claimed by the image that he had hoped to form. This claiming represents the work of the unconscious, which disrupts the conscious intentions of the subject.

In such fashion the text overturns Frankenstein's formulation and overturns the division that he would like to establish between himself as the master and the creature as the slave. By having the creature return the look, Shelley moves away from the dialectical relationship of self and other to a more complicated understanding of subject constitution that substitutes multiple subjectivities and competing identities for the notion of a unique "I." In doing so, the text reveals that at the basis of subjectivity, there may be competing subjectivities that cannot be categorized in neat binary systems. By replaying a subject formulation that challenges the work of binary subject constitution, as Lacan has elucidated, the creation scene puts in its place a reciprocal moment when the categories of gazer/gazed upon, and masculine/feminine, intersect and cannot be split into oppositions.

In highlighting the idea that writing does not return to definitive origins, Shelley tackles the most important literary question of the nineteenth century: the question of origins. At the very place where origin is supposed to originate, multiple origins are found.[6] Origin turns out to be a scene within several scenes, not reducible to one originary moment. It is significant that Frankenstein has a dream immediately following his creation, for the dream text overtakes the scene of creation and adds a twist: suddenly there are two scenes of creation/origin at stake. He relates the dream text:

> I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets
> of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprized, I embraced her, but as I imprinted

> the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her
> features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my
> dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the
> grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. . . . by the dim and
> yellow light of the moon . . . I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster
> whom I had created. (106)

The dream underscores the conflation of identities and an absence of boundaries in the identities of Elizabeth, Frankenstein's mother, Frankenstein, and his creature. Elizabeth is displaced by Frankenstein's mother. Then the dream ends and the identity of the mother is superimposed onto the identity of the creature. The dream text, in its play on multiple identities, upsets Frankenstein's wish for a one-to-one correspondence between the creator and the created.

In fact, the dream scene forecasts displacement and centers on a scene that cannot be directly viewed, similar to the autobiographer presenting his or her life screened by the narrative of another life. The creation scene resembles a stage and, significantly, it occurs in Frankenstein's bedroom. Immediately after the dream, he sees the creature holding up the "curtain of the bed" (106). The image of the creature is framed by a curtain, just as the creature's narrative is framed in the narratives of Frankenstein and Walton. The framing device suggests that looking through the mirror produces a displacement, not fully coextensive with the image viewed. Significantly, Frankenstein is only able to see the creature because of the effects of the "dim and yellow light of the moon" (106), recalling a mirror image, that refracts light. He does not view the creature directly; he sees it through an intermediary, "the light of the moon," similar to the subject looking at himself or herself in the mirror and seeing an image. This image is not a direct one; rather, the mirror supposedly creates the fiction of correspondence.

Frankenstein's dream ends with the image of the creature, suggesting that Frankenstein's setting of the stage of his origins is transferred onto the creature. The creature displaces the images of Elizabeth and Frankenstein's mother, intimating that the backdrop of the creature's desire will supersede Frankenstein's desire, just as the other narratives restage desire by lifting the narrative curtain onto another scene. By having the story continually move to another character, *Frankenstein* displaces subjectivity. In the center of Frankenstein's narrative, another scene is created, the scene of the creation of the creature, and the creature will eventually usurp Frankenstein's narrative on the *mer de glace*. Origin turns out to reveal several different frames, not reducible to one moment. The dream discloses a text of many selves, which do not stay in place and give rise to other stories that cannot be reduced to unitary meaning.

In addition to Frankenstein's not being able to create a corresponding representation of the subject, *Frankenstein* shows clearly through its narrative technique that

the subject cannot present itself directly; it does so at several steps removed from an originating voice. The frame narrative, in which Walton writes to his sister, Mrs. Saville, contains Frankenstein's story and the tale of the creature. Embedded within these stories are other stories, such as the narrative of the DeLaceys encased in the creature's account. The emphasis on storytelling and the presentation of a story in another narrative frame suggest that framing is the key device in telling of the self. A story cannot be told directly; rather, the frame mediates, separating the self from a direct presentation of a life story.[7]

Metanarrativity or the embedded story becomes a trope in *Frankenstein.* The tale-within-a-tale structure demonstrates that no one "original" story exists; rather, hybrid stories stray from the original author and the idea of unitary origins. By scattering a central subject, metanarrativity concentrates on the disappearance of identity.[8] *Frankenstein* refuses to posit a unified story; rather, continual reworkings and repiecings of stories assemble and then divide the origins of selfhood. In fact, Shelley's text can be said to dis-member radically the autobiographical mode, which has centered on the story of one unique "I." Challenging the "I" as the center of identity, *Frankenstein* focuses on the many authorial voices that compete and clash with one another.

Frankenstein would like, however, to position himself as the hero of his life who rivals nature; he desires to present his narrative account as the one corrective to Walton's ambition to discover a passage to the North Pole. Frankenstein recounts his narrative to Walton at the end of his quest when he is about to die. Frankenstein explains his role as moralizer when he states: " 'Unhappy man! Do you share my madness? Have you drunk also of the intoxicating draught? Hear me; let me reveal my tale, and you will dash the cup from your lips!' " (77). But his narration can also disclose his wish to re-member his life; that is to say, he looks to narrative to sew up the text of his life. He corrects his text in places in order to avoid a "mutilated" one. Frankenstein turns to narrative as a substitution for the mutilated text of the creature's body. In order to move away from the contingent horror of his fractured existence, embodied in the creature, he creates a text that will serve to displace that horror; he says that he has " 'lost every thing and cannot begin life anew' " (78), but for the time of his narration he looks into the mirror of his past and tries to fashion a coherent text. Shelley, however, rewrites Frankenstein's desire and presents a narrative body in pieces, rather than a sewn-up one. Such a narrative body is similar to the displacement that is a structural component of subjectivity. The more Frankenstein tries to tell his story, the more his story is usurped by other narrators and stories, suggesting no one story or subjectivity.

The subject in *Frankenstein* refers to itself by becoming another self or another narrative. The representation of the self to the self in autobiography is founded on a fiction, a representation. Shelley lifts the veil of the monstrosity of representation

and discloses what lies underneath the sewn-up harmony of literary self-represen-tation: precisely, a monster in that the pieces of the body do not coalesce.[9] After Frankenstein creates the creature, the creature "held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on [Frankenstein]" (106). The curtain in this scene suggests the frame: the intermediary between representation and the object. The frame, viewed in this way, covers over identity. This scene of self-confrontation shows that what lies behind the curtain of self-representation is what cannot be integrated into the "wholeness" of the subject. There will always be an excess of meaning (embodied in the creature) that upsets the notion of a unitary identity, thereby disturbing the notion of origins or closure. The narrative frames decompose the unitary quality of the original; they frame the myth of origin itself. The supplement, or the excess that subverts any attempt to fix identity, cannot be contained by the frame.

The narrative frame, then, continually displaces the notion of a unitary subject, as the subject in this text is susceptible to continual displacements by another story. Talk of the subject in *Frankenstein* is mediated through other fictions, other representations, pointing to the idea that the self is derivative, never original—a copy of a copy. And telling of the self is encased in a transcription within a transcription. By adopting this mode of self-representation, Shelley highlights the idea that self-representation is layered with other representations. Thus, the creature learns language by looking onto the scene of the DeLacey household through a chink in the wall. The creature relates that Safie "was endeavouring to learn their language; and the idea instantly occurred to me that I should make use of the same instructions to the same end" (163). This scene of the apprehension of language functions as another instance of the frame, in which language or the self is seen as being mediated. Just as the self cannot be presented directly, the creature learns language by observing another scene involving the many different layers of language.

Walton's project of recording Frankenstein's thoughts also shows language's displacements; he, in effect, makes a dis-membered body out of the raw pieces of narrative: "I have resolved every night, when I am not imperatively occupied by my duties, to record, *as nearly as possible* in his [Frankenstein's] own words, what he has related during the day" (79, my emphasis). He cannot present Frankenstein's words directly; he must record them "as nearly as possible in his own words," marking the fact that he does modify Frankenstein's narrative, just as Frankenstein tampers with nature in order to make his creation. He describes his "fervent longing to penetrate the secrets of nature" (88). Frankenstein cannot create an original body, one that is "natural"; similarly, the *Frankenstein* text does not originate freely from one source. Autobiography, in this sense, dismembers the "original" text of subjectivity.

The framing device in the novel announces that the "I," the first person, is a role

to be assumed and discarded. The text produces frames, canceling the idea of originary identity. The framing device emphasizes that a story cannot approximate the self; mediation will be involved. Shelley posits subjecthood and then takes it away. Thus, the text is involved in a dialectic between presenting the self and the subsequent absenting of the self. The artificial assemblage of the body parts of the creature signifies that body and narrative parts are productions to be put on. And Shelley rearranges those parts to suggest a new assemblage of fictional selves continually wandering away from origins, as the narrative moves away from a centered text in its multiple narrators.

The epistolary form as a structural device in *Frankenstein* suggests the positing and the taking away of subjectivity. In fact, the first two letters of Walton to his sister end respectively: "If I fail, you will see me again soon, or never" (66), and "Remember me with affection, should you never hear from me again" (70). Walton writes of his possible death at the North Pole while he is searching for a new passage, but the narrative proper of *Frankenstein* foregrounds, through its use of multiple narratives, the possibility that one's account (in a letter) may not arrive at its intended destination; that is to say, the destination that would provide final closure. As part of the frame narrative, the message contained in Walton's letters is another displaced onto the next person and story. It is appropriate that Shelley use the epistolary form, for it demonstrates that the frame covers over the story of identity. Further, this text lacks a composite signature; it is invaded by another subject. The creature breaks the fictional code of the letter in that he uncannily reveals the split in the subject, which should have remained hidden by an accepted fictionality. Central to the idea of the letter, as Derrida has suggested, is that it may never arrive. Derrida holds that the letter can be diverted or even destroyed by dissemination (*The Post Card* 33). Significantly, throughout the text of *Frankenstein,* Walton never discloses to the reader whether his sister has received any of his letters, emphasizing that a letter, a self mediated in language, does not have access to origins or destination.

As Shelley's text demonstrates, the letter moves on to the next signifier, and the multiple stories indicate that the transcriptions of the self are not definitive. Transcriptions emphasize a made personage, as the creature is, and a constructed narrative, fabricated from other sources. The tales within tales indicate a resistance to closure of the self and story, marking a disruption of originary identity, which privileges closure. Embedding as a structural device shows the impossibility of getting beyond narrative, beyond the fictions that mediate it. And, embedded in all of the embedded stories within the text are the marks and traces of the creature's writing as he leaves messages for Frankenstein on the barks of trees or cut in stone.

> My reign is not yet over. . . . you live, and my power is complete. Follow
> me; I seek the everlasting ices of the north, where you will feel the misery

of cold and frost, to which I am impassive. You will find near this place,
if you follow not too tardily, a dead hare; eat and be refreshed. Come on,
my enemy; we have yet to wrestle for our lives, but many hard and
miserable hours must you endure until that period shall arrive. (248)

The marks and the traces the creature inscribes in the trees may serve as a metaphor
for the idea of writing as a supplement. The creature continues to narrate to
Frankenstein, in the attempt to ward off the ultimate lack, which for the creature
would be death. It is as if the creature wants to keep Frankenstein alive so that the
creature will be able to narrate his story. This lack, as we have seen, stems from a
separation from the mother's body, and in this case, Frankenstein serves as the
mother image who brought about the lack in the creature. Words stand in as the
supplements for this desire. In fact, the entire text is a supplement in that three
editions to the novel exist: the 1818 edition, the 1823 edition, and the 1831 edition,
along with Mary Shelley's introduction to the 1831 edition and the preface to the
1818 edition allegedly written by Percy Shelley. She tells us in her 1831 introduc-
tion that "As far as I can recollect, [the preface] was entirely written by him" (60).
Ellie Ragland Sullivan and Mark Bracher explicate how narration must always
move away from the symptom, "to avoid the anxiety which designates a lack" (8).
The text's obsessive focus on narration reveals the need to cover up an absence in
the subject's discourse, which is effected by the death of Frankenstein's mother.
Given the biographical circumstances of the death of Mary Wollstonecraft, it is no
accident that the text continually moves on from story to story as if to avoid the scene
of the mother's death.

Written on the body of the creature is the textual mark of what cannot be
represented. Daniel Cottom argues, however, that "What is missing in Walton's
ship, what cannot be represented, is a woman. . . . The repression of women and,
specifically, of female sexuality, contributes to the novel's monstrousness" (69).
While I find his thesis provocative, what must be added to his idea is that what
cannot be represented is anyone, particularly the creature, who is described by a
series of signifiers: "daemon," "creature," "monster," "blot," and "abortion."[10]
What is monstrous about the text is that the signifieds for the creature are absent, but
what is indeed more monstrous is the veil Shelley lifts to show the fiction all the
other characters maintain about their desire to shore up signifier and signified. The
creature explains his predicament: "Was I . . . a monster, a blot upon the earth, from
which all men fled and whom all men disowned?" (166). The word blot suggests a
scattering and an erasure of the signified. We get a trace of the creature's narrative
because it is corrected and augmented by Frankenstein, whose narrative in turn is
recorded by Walton. Through fictional autobiography, Shelley reveals the subject
to be a blot, subject to the différance in representation.

2. The Author's Introduction to the 1831 Edition:
Dis(re)membering Identity

As we have seen in the text proper, the novel repeatedly returns to scenes of identity, in which the notion of a discrete identity collapses. The appearance of the double in *Frankenstein* signals a multiple and conflicting subjectivity. Additionally, the dream sequence unfolds an identity in pieces, as evidenced by the shifts from one subject to another. The novel's narrative structure mirrors this shifting ground among the subjectivities of Walton, Frankenstein, and the creature, and its obsessive focus on identity demonstrates that one's identity can never be centered in one's body. This idea paves the way for an understanding of Shelley's introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, where her text further reveals the divorce between her "I" and the text that she writes about herself. Just as the creature in the text plays out the excess in representation, disturbing Frankenstein's project of composite self-representation, Shelley in her introduction features the excess of the feminine voice not conforming to masculinist desires. She conceives thus of the traditional feminine subject as a dead body that the introduction will reanimate into a multiple and shifting subjectivity.

The introduction replays the novel's obsessive concern with origins. Shelley complies with the request of the publishers of the Standard Novels series to "furnish them with some account of the origin of the story" (55). Their request leads her to reflect on the origins of her life, and she begins this speculation by answering the question that so many persons had posed to her: " 'How [she], then a young girl, came to think of and to dilate upon so very hideous an idea?' " (55). She responds by relating a brief history of her life. But the Frankenstein story is inextricably bound with Shelley's self-representation. The story that she relates in the introduction focuses on the life of a woman—on how a woman is represented in discourse. In this history Shelley presents the reader with an image of a woman looking into the mirror of self-representation and seeing another. That is to say, two Mary Shelleys, and possibly more, clash and compete with one another and do not coalesce into one coherent image. On the one hand, she is "very adverse to bringing [herself] forward in print" (55); on the other, she "bid[s her] hideous progeny to go forth and prosper" (60). Instead of trying to find one interpretation for the introduction, as several critics have done,[11] it would be more productive to focus on the discontinuities (and their implications) in the feminine subject.

A consideration of the fractured subject in the introduction sets the stage for the subject in pieces in the main text. Significantly, Shelley, like her character Frankenstein, has a "waking dream" in which she imagines her fictional creation, the overreaching scientist, observing his handiwork with horror. "He sleeps; but he is awakened; he opens his eyes; behold, the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening his curtains and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes"

(59). The scene immediately shifts to Shelley, who opens her eyes from her waking dream "in terror" (59). Thus, she tells us, she had "found it . . . . [she] had *thought of a story*" (59). The conflation of several identities here—that of Shelley and of her fictional character—shows that identity shifts. Like Frankenstein, Shelley is haunted by that excess in identity; she writes concerning her waking dream that she "still could not so easily get rid of [her] hideous phantom; still it haunted [her]" (59). She imagines herself in the same position as Frankenstein; she creates a monstrous work, as several critics have proposed. Sidonie Smith depicts the nineteenth-century woman overstepping her "natural" bounds: "Effectively, the woman who would reason like universal man becomes unwomanly, a kind of monstrous creature or *lusus naturae*" (15). While several critics have focused on the impropriety of the woman author,[12] a shifting of the focus, here, to the text's concentration on specularity and on the fear of being followed by an image that does not correspond to "traditional" images will produce a more complex reading of the introduction.

Shelley's double follows her in her introduction; she is haunted by the secondary status of women in her culture. "Many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley, to which [she] was a devout but nearly silent listener" (58). The introduction sets up the creation myth of woman in Shelley's culture. Shelley articulates herself being imaged by the screen of patriarchal culture, and she creates a "monstrous" text in her introduction by conforming to the image of a proper woman. Her scene of unendurable confrontation in which she awakes from horror, however, may be recast into the horror of man creating woman in his image. Shelley creates a story of origins that mirrors the status of woman in her society. Her scene of the origins of the *Frankenstein* text follows another autobiographical scene where she is the "devout but nearly silent listener" to the "conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley" (58). The depiction of the two scenes shows conflicting images of Mary Shelley's positioning in her society: on the one hand, she looks into the mirror and sees a devout listener; on the other, she sees an artist creating a "monstrous" handiwork.

As we have seen from the main text, categories break down, and what one character demonstrates at one moment shifts ground continuously, as with the creature's innate goodness and his subsequent reign of terror. As the main text is concerned with representation and its non-correspondence, so the introduction concentrates on Shelley looking into the mirror and asking the same questions that the creature does: "Who was I? What was I?" and veering off the "traditional" signification of the feminine subject. Shelley calls into question the notion of categories by arguing for the shifting ground of the notion of category. Her gendered subjectivity does not fully inhabit the gender that it approximates; it is never quite carried out according to expectation. Like the creature in the text proper, Shelley misses the mark of gendered sexuality (we remember that the creature is made up of disparate pieces of bodies), in that she breaks the connection between the

represented and the representer.

In this introduction to the 1831 edition, then, Shelley sews onto her body or produces onto her body the category of the feminine. She creates a Shelley, a fictional character, just as through the representations of Walton, Victor, and the creature she manufactures fictional subjects who cannot present themselves directly. Too many critics have taken her at her word, equating the author of the introduction with the "real" and definitive Mary Shelley.[13] Kaja Silverman points out the limitations of this view when she writes: "The biographical strategy . . . fails to distinguish . . . between the author 'inside' the text and the author 'outside' the text—between authorial subjectivity and the historical author" (374). The problem with biographical interpretations of *Frankenstein* (such as those advanced by Johnson and Moers)[14] is that they fail to account for the text's suggestion that identity is taken up by the subject only to be discarded. Additionally, Shelley intimates that the representation of identity will always be mediated by a screen identity. The biographical method also assumes that female writers will always write texts that express their "true" gender. Mary Jacobus makes this point with particular force when she writes about the biographical interpretations of *Frankenstein*: "Feminist interpretations such as these have no option but to posit the woman author as origin and her life as the primary locus of meaning" (138). The supplemental quality of *Frankenstein* signals, however, that there will always be a multiplicity of persons behind the "I," and no one original "I."

What does the presentation of Shelley's life, along with the creature's, Walton's, and Frankenstein's, disclose about origins?[15] To suggest that Shelley in the main text writes a covert autobiography of a woman's life, as Barbara Johnson has pointed out, in that she must write behind the cover of a mask, is an influential point for feminism.[16] But Johnson's idea does not portray the entire story. In the introduction Shelley repeats the origins of a woman's life to displace that origin. She sets up identity and calls it into question, displacing and disrupting her "definitive" place in culture. And in subverting the story of man that makes up Western culture in the main narrative, she sets the stage for redeploying the origins of a woman's life. The introduction, then, can serve as a way to critique the lived life of a "story." Shelley challenges the idea of a monolithic identity; in its place, she substitutes the identity of woman that does not stay in place.

Furthermore, Shelley writes in disguise in the introduction, showing that the first person in narrative is assumed—she "dresses up" as a woman and writes in drag. Judith Butler poses the question: "Does being female constitute a 'natural fact' or a cultural performance?" (*Gender Trouble* x). The introduction portrays Shelley performing the role of a woman. As the narrative proper deals with the made personage of the creature, the introduction forecasts the construction of the feminine body as it takes up its place in writing the feminine voice.

The introduction sounds the death knell of the possibility of definitive represen-

tation of the subject to itself, which the remainder of the text illustrates. As Frankenstein's quest for origins leads him to the discovery of a creature that does not correspond to his intentions, the fictional subject that Shelley creates in the introduction cannot reflect a composite representation of herself. But this is a representation with a difference: for here Shelley challenges the notion of one fixed inscribed woman. Her creation of the feminine subject paradoxically leads to the dismemberment of that subject as she has traditionally been conceived. Any attempt to create composite origins leads to a decay in that telling. Corrupting the ideal of woman by offering a multidimensional feminine voice in the introduction, Shelley tampers with static notions of woman. Veering from the originary meaning of woman, she subverts the myth of the origin of woman. Given the representationality of discourse, the subject looks into the mirror of herself and sees a fiction, which is embedded in other stories. Shelley looks into the mirror of life stories by women and then writes an introduction that turns out to be parody in its excess of "womanliness."

The introduction provides another frame to the discourse on identity; as we have seen, the frame permits identity to escape. Shelley writes that her introduction can only be an "appendage to a former production" (55). The words here are suggestive: "appendage" intimates parts that cannot coalesce into a whole and "production" implies the manufacturing of identity; there may indeed be other productions. She goes on to state, "I can scarcely accuse myself of a personal intrusion" (55). In her assumption of a role, the fictional Shelley distances herself from writing like a "monster"; she writes like a "woman."[17] In telling the fiction of herself in the introduction, Shelley presents herself as so far removed from the monstrous, a woman writer, that she erases herself. She makes the distinction between girl and monster clear: "How I, then a young girl, came to think of and to dilate upon so very hideous an idea?" (55).

Turning to Irigaray's thoughts on woman as mimic will also suggest an alternative reading to the one that positions Shelley as simply a pawn for her husband's and, ultimately, patriarchal words, as Margaret Homans has suggested.[18] Irigaray writes:

> To play with mimesis is . . . for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of the 'perceptible,' of 'matter'—to 'ideas,' in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make 'visible,' by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means 'to unveil' the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. They also remain elsewhere. . . . (76)

I quote Irigaray at length because her idea of femininity as parodic replay suggests an alternative way to read the character Shelley in the introduction. Shelley shows her persona occupying its assigned gendered position in the symbolic order. But that position does not remain stable. In fact, the subject that she produces in the introduction is a double, the return of the repressed, which uncannily reveals through its excessiveness what should have remained hidden. That is to say, she creates a fictional character, herself, to mimic a mirror image of representations of women. Her representation of herself can only be based on other representations; thus, her autobiography is framed by the discourse of woman. She can write a parodic depiction of a woman because she knows that the subject originates from other stories, from fictions. Helene Cixous points out, "the origin is a masculine myth: I always want to know where I come from" (53). Shelley, in her introduction, wears as Stephen Heath points out in his discussion of Marlene Dietrich, "all the accoutrements of femininity *as* accoutrements, does the poses as poses, gives the act as an act" ("Joan Riviere and the Masquerade" 57). Women fictional autobiographers may be better at drag because of the many different layers of screens they wear to represent the self. In a sense, then, Shelley understands origin to be impossible to achieve because of the many different layers of subjectivity. She refuses to tell any one story, thereby critiquing the notion of a unitary one.

It might seem, however, that the tale within a tale, or, in this case, Shelley's introduction, is the mode par excellence for a woman writer because it reestablishes her position within the patriarchal system of language. Embedding discloses that she is screened in by the fact that language is patriarchal. Embedding herself in a tale (of a woman's life), Shelley's narrative falls into line with that great abstract narrative of a woman's life of deference and erasure. We recall her words about her writing: "At this time [Percy] desired that I should write, not so much with the idea that I could produce any thing worthy of notice, but that he might himself judge how far I possessed the promise of better things hereafter" (56). But the tale within a tale also exposes the tale to be a fiction. Shelley in her introduction demonstrates the fictionality of a gendered position; she can put it on and take it off. She can posit her identity as a character in the introduction, but the main text continually subverts the notion of a definitive identity in control of its representation or its text. The novel demonstrates that voice has always been derivative, a collection of body parts with no definitive origins.

Shelley's text points out that monstrosity results when strict categorizations of gender remain unchallenged. The main text critiques the masculine notion of identity based on power and ambition. Walton writes to his sister, "But success *shall* crown my endeavours. . . . What can stop the determined heart and resolved will of man?" (71-72); while Shelley in the introduction tells her audience that "[she] did not make [her]self the heroine of [her] tales" (56). The introduction challenges the feminine notion of identity based on passivity. Discrete notions of masculine and

feminine identity mimic the status quo, and Shelley's text is at pains to disrupt categories in order to call them into question.

Fictional autobiography depicts a scene where character cannot be directly viewed; the self is presented through a screen in the guise, for example, of the double, or the framing device that dilutes a discrete presentation of character. But what happens in a feminine narrative where the female character has been viewed and defined all too readily by her culture? Shelley appropriates the idea of not being directly viewed and translates it into a multiple viewing of the feminine subject. That is to say, by challenging composite notions of the "I," she shows the "I," particularly the feminine "I," as remaining outside the boundaries of representation. Critiquing the feminine "unique" position in cultural discourse that creates a whole character, Shelley writes an "I" that is alienated, and not closed; therefore, she can reconstruct it.

One of the ways that Shelley renounces the composite notion of the "I" is through a breaking apart of a composite narrative, which would seek to enclose the self in time. By breaking up narrative points of time in her text, through the use of multiple narrators, Shelley shatters a linear model of selfhood. If there can be multiple and conflicting instants in time, revealed through the multiple narrators, then the self in time does not remain closed, suggesting that no self can be pinned down definitively. There can be no master reading of woman, or master text of her; rather, Shelley engenders a dis-membered subject who discloses the fiction behind the mask of unified subjectivity.

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NOTES

Note: I would like to thank Carol Bernstein for her insightful comments on an earlier version of this essay.

1. For a psychoanalytic reading of the double in Frankenstein, see Jackson.

2. See Cottom and Brooks for analyses of representation in *Frankenstein*. Brooks argues that language is "irreparably marked by lack, by monsterism" (209), and Cottom maintains that "In seeking to represent himself, man makes himself a monster" (60).

3. Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, explains the child's entry into the symbolic stemming from the separation from the mother. He elaborates the story of a child's game of disappearance and return. The boy playing with a wooden reel and a piece of string stages its disappearance by throwing it over the edge of his curtained cot. He then pulls the reel back to him, thereby making it appear, all the while saying *fort* and *da* (gone and there). Freud interprets this game as the boy's compensating for his mother's disappearance by himself making objects disappear and reappear. By staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach, the boy enters the symbolic structure of language which compensates for the lack of the mother.

4. See, for example, Hindle 40 ff. and Anne Mellor.

5. A reproduction of the 1831 frontispiece also faces the title page of Anne Mellor's book.

6. David Carroll makes precisely this point in his analysis of Freud's attempt to posit the origin of an analysand's neurosis. Carroll writes: "At the very place where the origin is supposed to be, a multiplicity of origins is found: the reality of the scene, what was perceived by the child, turns out to be not an event in itself, but a series of associations of events, scenes within scenes" (523).

7. Beth Newman posits that frame narratives show that "a story can be cut off from its origin in a particular speaker and tell itself in other speakers" (142), thus each story "functions as a text, having been severed from its own origins, divested of its originating voice. The mark of severance is the frame itself" (147).

8. Devon Hodges was the first to observe that "In *Frankenstein,* the unity of the subject is subverted by the presence of multiple narrators" (157).

9. Cottom argues that "Frankenstein's monster images the monstrous nature of representation" (60).

10. Chris Baldick has conducted a word-tally of the many names for the monster: " 'monster' with 27 appearances . . . 'fiend' (25), followed by 'daemon' (18), 'creature' (16), 'wretch' (15), 'devil' (8), 'being' (4) and 'ogre' (1)" (10).

11. See, for example, Johnson, Mellor, and Poovey.

12. See Poovey.

13. See, for example, Barbara Johnson and Anne K. Mellor. Mellor argues: "Despite this tradition of female authorship, Mary Shelley doubted the legitimacy of her own literary voice, a doubt that determined her decision to speak through three *male* narrators" (53). It will become clear that I disagree with Mellor's contention.

14. Moers argues for a biographical interpretation of *Frankenstein*; she maintains that "*Frankenstein* is a birth myth" (79).

15. The standard feminist interpretation of *Frankenstein* is that Mary Shelley writes behind the cover of a mask. See, for example, Anne Mellor who notes that "The structure of the novel builds a series of screens around her authentic voice" (57). Rather, as I have been arguing, Shelley's text shows that no voice is authentic. The narrative frames demonstrate that voice cannot be captured.

16. Johnson has argued that "In a humanistic tradition in which *man* is the measure of all things, how does an appendage go about telling the story of her life" (58).

17. Mary Poovey makes this point. She argues: "*Frankenstein* calls into question, not the social conventions that inhibit creativity, but rather the egotism that Mary Shelley associates with the artist's monstrous self-assertion" (122).

18. Homans writes: "To carry a book is exactly what Mary Shelley does in bearing the words of the male authors, in giving birth to a hideous progeny that is at once hook and demon" (152).

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