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# Frankenstein and the Tradition of Realism

GEORGE LEVINE

The English novel, as a form, has rarely been kind to characters with large aspirations. For the most part, it has preferred to chastise them and to praise those heroes reconciled to unheroic lives. In a way, the limits of praiseworthy aspiration and of the capacity to act effectively on the world are established in *Robinson Crusoe*, which offers us a hero whose heroism consists in survival and learning to use the most ordinary materials to build a home and a thriving economy. That the story is, as a whole, incredible makes it all the more characteristic since its literary strategy is to make the unbelievable seem quite ordinary, and it uses extravagance not to create a hero with the kind of aspirations appropriate to romance, but with great expectations which go no further than getting rich. The conventions of realism, to which, by and large, the central traditions of the novel were moving by the nineteenth century, entail a preoccupation with ordinary materials so that, even in large historical dramas like those of Scott or in fictions, like Dickens's, where fantasy is allowed a much freer rein, the hero who aspires greatly is regarded with distrust, or gently mocked, or frustrated entirely. Most of the great novelists, from Scott and Jane Austen to Thackeray and George Eliot, tend to concern themselves with heroes and heroines whose major problems are not to affect the course of history or even to make a significant public difference, but to achieve, within the limits imposed by an extremely complicated and restrictive bourgeois society, a satisfactory *modus vivendi*. Only in gothic fiction can we find heroes whose ambitions—like Melmoth the Wanderer's—outstrip the limits of that society and are not unequivocally judged. Only there can we find directly and unprejudicially dealt with the large emotional energies which are impatient with the quotidian.

Yet it is striking that the great nineteenth-century non-realistic fictions like *Frankenstein* or *Wuthering Heights*, or even lesser works like *Melmoth the Wanderer* and *Uncle Silas*, and certainly the romances of Scott, all tend to share certain attitudes toward heroism which we have hitherto too easily located in traditions of realism. Close examination of any of these works makes clear how inadequate the term realism is for any but the crudest sorts of notation, and how naturally "realistic" methods slip over into romance, or gothicism, or other non-realist categories. It is possible, I think, to take a work like *Frankenstein* and see it as representative of certain attitudes and techniques that become central to the realist tradition itself. As it works frankly in a world freed from some of the inhibiting restrictions of "belief" and "fact," it allows us to see at work quite openly some of the tensions

that always threaten to destroy the realist world of the ordinary in which belief is compatible with desire.

## I

Frankenstein has the qualities of a genuine hero—or so, at least, the narrative of his story specifically tells us. He is clearly conceived as a figure sharing many of the qualities of Milton's Satan, some of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, and some, too, of Percy Shelley. The sea captain, Walton, the monster, and Frankenstein himself testify to his potential greatness. "What a glorious creature must he have been in the days of his prosperity," writes Walton, "when he is thus noble and godlike in ruin!" (London: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 210). And Frankenstein, as if to make clear to Walton and to us that the analogy with the fallen angel is not exaggerated, is quoted, immediately afterwards, as saying: "I trod heaven in my thoughts, now exulting in my powers, now burning with the idea of their effects. From my infancy I was imbued with high hopes and a lofty ambition; but how am I sunk! Oh! my friend, if you had known me as I once was, you would not recognise me in this state of degradation. Despondency rarely visited my heart; a high destiny seemed to bear me on, until I fell, never, never again to rise" (p. 211). And the monster, overcome by remorse at his creator's death, cries out on seeing his body, "Oh, Frankenstein! generous and self-devoted being! what does it avail that I now ask thee to pardon me?" (p. 219). "I have devoted my creator, the select specimen of all that is worthy of love and admiration among men, to misery" (p. 222). There is nothing ambivalent about these commendations (although there is a curious note in the monster's word "self-devoted" to which I shall have to return). Frankenstein apparently combined extraordinary powers with physical and spiritual beauty, great ambition with great tenderness.

But one of the major ironies of the novel, *Frankenstein*, is that it seems, by the direction of its three separate narratives, and the fates it spells out, to be explicitly anti-heroic, to challenge the ambition and actions which make Frankenstein such a special sort of man. It uses some of the conventions of the gothic and sensation novels to reject those traditions and assert the value of harmonious and quiet domestic life. The assertion of these values is, however, incomplete, conditional on an awareness of what they cost, and is made, in any case, in a manner that is both complicated and moving and altogether of a different species from similar kinds of assertion in works which salaciously exploit excess to assert some final pietistic moralism. It calls to mind not *Fanny Hill* (pornography has intimate relations with gothicism), which pretends to be concerned with the corrupting power of civilization on rural innocence, or even Lewis's *The Monk* (which is, in about equal parts, a pornographic, gothic, and psychological novel), but, as it is intended to do, Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (Walton says that his interest in discovering mysteries was inspired by Coleridge's poem). That poem carries us through an extraordinary supernatural and symbolic journey, only to end in a way that, in another context, would seem merely banal:

*O sweeter than the Marriage-feast  
 'Tis sweeter far to me  
 To walk together to the Kirk  
 With a goodly company.*

*To walk together to the Kirk  
 And all together pray,  
 While each to his great father bends,  
 Old men, and babes, and loving friends,  
 And Youths and Maidens gay.*

*Farewell, farewell! but this I tell  
 To thee, thou wedding guest!  
 He prayeth well who loveth well  
 Both man and bird and beast.*

*He prayeth best who loveth best,  
 All things both great and small:  
 For the dear God, who loveth us,  
 He made and loveth all.*

*Frankenstein* does not look back to the sensation novel but forward to realistic books like Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* or Conrad's *The Secret Sharer* which—like Coleridge's poem—explore the psychology of unorthodox aspirations and complicate traditional pieties with metaphysical mystery.

Coleridge's description of the task undertaken in the *Lyrical Ballads* by him and Wordsworth is remarkably appropriate to *Frankenstein* and suggests as well how the fantastic *Frankenstein* is, in fact, connected with the traditions of realism which were most fully developed after it. Coleridge and Wordsworth were to undertake the writing of poems of two sorts:

*In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. . . . For the second class, subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life; the characters and incidents were to be such as will be found in every village and its vicinity, where there is a meditative and feeling mind to seek after them, or to notice them, when they present themselves. [Coleridge was to write about] persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, [but with] a semblance of truth sufficient to procure . . . that willing suspension of disbelief which constitutes poetic faith. (Biographia Literaria, ch. xiv)*

Percy Shelley's description, using the voice of the true author in the Preface to the 1818 edition, echoes Coleridge in a way that is surely not coincidental:

*I have not considered myself as merely weaving a series of supernatural terrors. The event on which the intent of the story depends is exempt from the dis-*

*advantages of a mere tale of spectres or enchantment. It was recommended by the novelty of the situations which it developes; and, however impossible as a physical fact, affords a point of view to the imagination for the delineating of human passions more comprehensive and commanding than any which the ordinary relations of existing events can yield.*

*I have thus endeavoured to preserve the truth of the elementary principles of human nature, while I have not scrupled to innovate upon their combinations.*

And, though these are Percy's not Mary's words, it is not unreasonable to take with some seriousness the following: "yet my chief concern in this respect has been limited to the avoiding [of] the enervating effects of the novels of the present day, and to the exhibition of the amiableness of domestic affection, and the excellence of universal virtue" (pp. 13–14).

As many critics have noted, one of the most interesting aspects of *Frankenstein* is that, for the most part, it eschews the supernatural. Mary's originating idea for the story was developed from what was taken to be fact: "They talked," she wrote of Byron and Shelley in her introduction to the 1831 edition of the novel, "of the experiments of Dr. Darwin (I speak not of what the Doctor really did, or said that he did, but, as more to my purpose, of what was then spoken of as having been done by him), who preserved a piece of vermicelli in a glass case, till by some extraordinary means it began to move with voluntary motion. Not thus, after all, would life be given. Perhaps a corpse would be re-animated; galvanism had given token of such things: perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth" (p. 9). In any case, beyond the fatal *donnée*—that it was possible to induce life into dead matter—*Frankenstein* fairly severely confines itself to the possible, if not always to the probable. It maintains a remarkable consistency and coherence of characterization and its surface details are either recognizable in ordinary experience or follow almost inevitably from the fact of the monster's existence. Given the initial idea, there is very little of the improbable in it. I don't mean to claim that it thus belongs within the traditions of realism, but rather that its effects and its power derive from its rejection of arbitrariness, indeed, from the almost austere way in which Mary Shelley insists on following out the consequences of her initial imagination. The scenery of the Alps, the mad chase across the Arctic ocean, the traditional abstract emotiveness of the language all link the novel with novels of sensation—as does the imagination of the hero himself. But by focusing so intensely on the landscape of the hero's mind, and on the product of its energies, and by eschewing any easy intervention of supernatural force, Mary Shelley sets out with astonishing clarity some of the moral implications of the heroic ideal. She writes, in fact, a brilliant psychological novel in which the psychology is the action itself, and while free to insist on the Wordsworthian, Coleridgean, and Shelleyan morals of the importance of community, domestic affections, love, and sensitivity to nature, she writes a story whose moral ambivalences of action are the real terror.

*Frankenstein* is one of the first in a long tradition of fictional overreachers, of characters who act out in various ways the myth of Faust, and transport it from

the world of mystery and miracle to the commonplace. He is destroyed not by some metaphysical agency, some supernatural intervention—as God expelled Adam from Eden or Mephistopheles collected his share of the bargain (though echoes of these events are everywhere)—but by his own nature and the consequences of living in or rejecting human community. Frankenstein is in a way the indirect father of lesser, more humanly recognizable figures, like Becky Sharp or Pip or Lydgate, people who reject the conventional limits imposed upon them by society and who are punished for their troubles. *Frankenstein* embodies one of the central myths of realistic fiction in the nineteenth century, even in the contrast between its sensational style and its apparently explicit moral implications. It embodies characteristically a simultaneous awe and reverence toward greatness of ambition, and fear and distrust of those who act on such ambition. That ambivalence is almost always disguised in realistic fiction, where the manner itself seems to reject the possibility of greatness and the explicit subject is frequently the evil of aspiring to it: in gothic fiction the energies to be suppressed by the realist ideal, by the model of Flemish painting, by worldly wise compromise with the possible, are released. Gothic fiction, as Lowry Nelson has observed, “by its insistence on singularity and exotic setting . . . seems to have freed the minds of readers from direct involvement of their superegos and allowed them to pursue daydreams and wish fulfillment in regions where inhibitions and guilt could be suspended” (*Yale Review*, 1962–63, p. 238). The mythology of virtue rewarded, which was curiously central to English realism, is put to question in the gothic landscape where more powerful structures than social convention give shape to wish; and, as Nelson suggests, reader and writer alike were freed to pursue the possibilities of their own potential evil. It is striking how difficult it is to locate in realistic fiction any positive and active evil. The central realist mythology is spelled out in characters like George Eliot’s Tito Melema, whose wickedness is merely a gradual sliding into the consequences of a natural egoism. In gothic fiction, but more particularly in *Frankenstein*, evil is both positively present and largely inexplicable. Although ostensibly based on the ideas of Godwin’s rationalist ethics which see evil as a consequence of maltreatment or injustice, there is no such comfortable explanation for the evil of Frankenstein himself. Where did his decision to create the monster come from? Mere chance. Evil is a deadly and fascinating mystery originating in men’s minds as an inexplicable but inescapable aspect of human goodness.

It is a commonplace of criticism of *Frankenstein* as of Conrad’s *The Secret Sharer*, that the hero and his antagonist are one. Leggatt is the other side of the captain; the monster and Frankenstein are doubles, two aspects of the same being. This seems an entirely just reading given that Frankenstein creates the monster and that, as they pursue their separate lives, they increasingly resemble and depend upon each other so that by the end Frankenstein pursues his own monster, their positions reversed, and the monster plants clues to keep Frankenstein in pursuit. As Frankenstein’s creation, the monster can be taken as an expression of an aspect of Frankenstein’s self: the monster is a sort of New Critical art object, leading an apparently independent organic life of its own and yet irremediably and subtly

tied to its creator, re-enacting in mildly disguised ways, his creator's feelings and experiences. We will have to return to this aspect of the novel again, but I want to point out here certain other doublings or duplications in the novel.

The world of *Frankenstein* has a kind of objective existence which only partially disguises—much less convincingly than a realistic novel would—its quality as projection of a subjective state. The laws governing this world are almost the laws of dream in which the control of action is only partially, if at all, ordinary causation. Characters and actions move around central emotional preoccupations. Clearly, for example, Walton is an incipient Frankenstein, in his lesser way precisely in Frankenstein's position: ambitious for glory, embarked on a voyage of scientific discovery, putting others to risk for his work, isolated from the rest of mankind by his ambition, and desperately lonely. Frankenstein becomes his one true friend, and he is a friend who dies just at the point when their friendship is becoming solidified. And, of course, he is the man to whom Frankenstein tells his story, partly, like the Ancient Mariner, to keep him from the same fate. Moreover, the lesson he learns is not merely the explicit one, that he must sacrifice his ambition to others, but that he must also reject the vengeance that Frankenstein wishes upon him. Frankenstein's last wish is that Walton promise to destroy the monster; yet when the monster appears, Walton does not kill him but rather listens to his story and is moved to compassion which he tries to force himself to reject. He cannot kill the monster, who speaks in a way that echoes Frankenstein's own ideas and sentiments; and, though this is not stated, in rejecting the vengeance which consumed Frankenstein, he is finally freed into a better (and perhaps a lesser) life—but one to which he returns in bitterness and dejection.

Clerval, too, Frankenstein's friend from boyhood, echoes an aspect of Frankenstein's self. Clerval is, surely, Frankenstein without the monster. Frankenstein describes himself as having been committed from his youth to the "metaphysical, or, in its highest sense, the physical secrets of the world." Meanwhile, Clerval occupied himself, so to speak, "with the moral relations of things. The busy stage of life, the virtues of heroes, and actions of men, were his theme; and his hope and his dream was to become one among those whose names are recorded in story, as the gallant and adventurous benefactors of our species" (pp. 37–38). Except, of course, for the emphasis on political action, this description would serve for Frankenstein as well. Moreover, as Frankenstein himself notes, both he and Clerval were softened into gentleness and generosity by the influence of Elizabeth: "I might have become sullen in my study, rough through the ardour of my nature, but that she was there to subdue me to a semblance of her own gentleness. And Clerval . . . might not have been so perfectly humane . . . so full of kindness and tenderness amidst his passion for adventurous exploit, had she not unfolded to him the real loveliness of beneficence, and made the doing good the end and aim of his soaring ambition" (p. 38). Clerval, whose father denies him a university education, feels, like Frankenstein himself, a repugnance to the meanness of business. On the night Frankenstein is to depart for Ingolstadt and the university, he reads in Clerval's "kindling eye and in his animated glance a firm but restrained resolve, not to be chained to the miserable details of commerce" (p. 44). Both men reject the occu-

pations of ordinary life, both are consumed with great ambitions, both are kept humane by the influence of the same woman, and, in the end, both are destroyed by Frankenstein's own creation, by the aspect of Frankenstein which ignores "the moral relations of things." Moreover, when Clerval dies, Frankenstein is not only accused of the murder (and seems unwilling to exculpate himself though he knows he has evidence that will do so), but he falls almost mortally ill—as though he himself has been the victim.

These kinds of redoublings are characteristic of the whole novel. Not only all the major characters, but the minor characters as well seem to be echoes of each other. Every story seems a variation on every other. Both Elizabeth and Justine are found by the Frankenstein family and rescued from poverty, and both accuse themselves, in different ways, of the murder of Frankenstein's youngest brother. When she hears of his death, Elizabeth exclaims, "O God, I have murdered my darling child" (p. 72). Justine, too, is a kind of sister of Frankenstein. She so adored Madame Frankenstein that she "endeavoured to imitate her phraseology and manners, so that even now," Elizabeth writes, "she often reminds me of her" (p. 65). And after she is convicted, Justine "confesses" to the murder.

And then there are the parents. Frankenstein himself is a father, the creator of the monster, and the novel is in part an examination of the responsibility of the father to the son. The monster asks Frankenstein for the gift of a bride to alleviate his solitude. Frankenstein's father in effect gives Frankenstein a bride, and a sister. The night before Elizabeth is brought into the Frankenstein house, his mother "had said playfully,—'I have a pretty present for my Victor—tomorrow he shall have it.' And when, on the morrow, she presented Elizabeth to me as her promised gift, I, with childish seriousness, interpreted her words literally, and looked upon Elizabeth as mine—mine to protect, love, and cherish. All praises bestowed on her, I received as made to a possession of my own. We called each other familiarly by the name of cousin. No word, no expression could body forth the kind of relation in which she stood to me—my more than sister, since till death she was to be mine only" (pp. 35–36). Frankenstein's father, in bestowing the gift and in caring for him, behaves to his son as the monster would have Frankenstein behave. Interestingly, in this extraordinary novel of intricate relations, when Frankenstein's father arrives after Clerval's death to help his son, Frankenstein at first assumes that his visitor is to be the murderer: "Oh take him away! I cannot see him," he cries. "For God's sake, do not let him enter." This strange hallucination focuses again on the bond that connects all the characters in the novel, and suggests how deeply incestuous and Oedipal the relationships are. It suggests, too, how close to the surface of this world are motives derived not from external experience, but from emotional and psychic energies beneath the surface of things.

Despite the potentially easy patterning, there is no simple way to define the relation between parents and offspring in this novel. Frankenstein's father is loved and generous, and marries the daughter of an unsuccessful merchant who, in his pride, almost brings his whole family down. The father of Safie betrays his daughter and her lover and is the cause of the fall of the DeLacey family. Felix



DeLacey, in order to save Safie, brings his whole family to the brink of ruin. Frankenstein ignores his creation and, in effect, destroys his family as a consequence. Father and sons are almost equally responsible and irresponsible: what is consistent is only the focal concern on the relationship itself.

Within the novel, almost all relations have the texture of blood kinship. Percy Shelley's notorious preoccupation with incest is manifest in Mary's work. The model is Eden, where Eve is an actual physical part of Adam, and the monster's situation is caused precisely because he has no blood relations, no kinship. Frankenstein, on his death bed, makes clear why there is such an intense, reduplicative obsession throughout the novel on the ties of kinship:

*I thank you Walton . . . for your kind intentions towards so miserable a wretch; but when you speak of new ties, and fresh affections, think you that any can replace those who are gone? Can any man be to me as Clerval was; or any woman another Elizabeth? Even where the affections are not strongly moved by any superior excellence, the companions of our childhood always possess a certain power over our minds, which hardly any later friend can obtain. They know our infantine dispositions, which, however they may be afterwards modified, are never eradicated; and they can judge of our actions with more certain conclusions as to the integrity of our motives. A sister or a brother can never, unless indeed such symptoms have been shown early, suspect the other of fraud or false dealing, when another friend, however strongly he may be attached, may, in spite of himself, be contemplated with suspicion. (pp. 211–212)*

In the original version of the novel, Elizabeth was, as the Oxford editor M. K. Joseph points out, Frankenstein's cousin, "the daughter of his father's sister" (p. 236n), and throughout the revised version, Frankenstein continues to refer to her as cousin. Every death in the novel is a death in the family, literal or figurative: what Frankenstein's ambition costs him is the family connection which makes life humanly possible. William is his brother. Justine looks like his mother, and is another kind of sister, though a subservient one. Clerval is a "brother." Elizabeth is both bride and sister (and cousin). And as a consequence of these losses, his father dies as well. Frankenstein kills his family, and is, in his attempt to obliterate his own creation, his own victim. As he dies, he severs the monster's last link with life so that, appropriately, the monster then moves out across the frozen wastes to immolate himself. The family is an aspect of the self and the self cannot survive bereft of its family.

Thus, even while it wanders across the Alps, to the northern islands of Scotland, to the frozen wastes of the Arctic, *Frankenstein* is a claustrophobic novel. It presents us not with the landscape of the world but of a single mind, and its extraordinary power, despite its grotesqueness and the awkwardness of so much of its prose, resides in its mythic exploration of that mind, and of the consequences of its choices, the mysteries of its impulses. Strangely, the only figure who stands outside of that mind is Walton, who is nevertheless, as I have already argued, another "double" of Frankenstein. Walton provides the frame which allows us to glimpse Frankenstein's story. He is the "wedding guest," who can

hear the story only because he is so similar to Frankenstein, and who can engage us because while he is outside the story he is still, like us, implicated in it. He is the link between our world and Frankenstein's, and he is saved by Frankenstein and by his difference from him, to return to his country and, significantly, his sister—his one connection with the human community.

The apparent simplicity and order of Mary Shelley's story only intensifies its extraordinary emotional energy and complexity. Although, for example, it is not unreasonable to argue, as Shelley did, that it aims at exhibiting "the amiableness of domestic affection, and the excellence of universal virtue," we can see that the strongly ordering hand of the novelist has allowed the expression of powerful tensions and energies which realistic techniques would tend to repress and, which, having their source in the irrational, will not resolve themselves into any simple meanings. Comparing Frankenstein to Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*, Christopher Small argues the same point:

*Mary's imaginative response was in many respects similar to Brown's, but what she got from him was not so much perhaps any specific elements of her story as a readiness to accept what her imagination offered. Indeed, she went much further than he did. In Brown, the unconscious material so profusely thrown up remains disorganized, much of the time incoherent, and this was paradoxically an effect of his failure to allow it full force or to trust the products of his imagination. A pervasive scepticism or, at bottom, a moral timidity caused him to shy away from their full development and consequently to land as often as not in the most ludicrous banality. Mary, of far greater resolution and single-mindedness . . . was able to bind many strands into a single whole, and to give her creation a life outside and beyond herself. (Ariel Like a Harpy: Shelley, Mary and "Frankenstein," Letchworth, England, 1972, p. 99)*

*Frankenstein*, like other great romances, notably *Wuthering Heights*, is a more shapely and orderly book than most realistic novels, but the order is the means by which Mary's "readiness to accept what her imagination offered" is expressed. As Northrop Frye has suggested, the freer the imagination is allowed to roam, the more formally shapely will be the structure of the work. Imagination is structural power. Or at least it is that in *Frankenstein* and *Wuthering Heights* which, freed from the initial commitment to plausibility and to reason, take the shape of the writers' most potent imaginations and desires.

The simplicity of the structure, Walton's tale enfolding Frankenstein's, which, in turn, enfolds that of the monster, implies a clarity and firmness of moral ordering which is not present in the actual texture of the novel. Walton would seem the ultimate judge of the experience, as the outsider: yet he explicitly accepts Frankenstein's judgment of it, and largely exculpates him. The monster's own defense and explanation, lodged in the center of the story, is, however, by far the most convincing—though it is also a special—reading, and Frankenstein himself confesses that he has failed in his responsibility to his creature. In the end, how-

ever, we are not left with a judgment but with Walton's strangely uncolored report of the monster's last speech and last action. If anyone, the monster has the last word: and that word expresses a longing for self-destruction, for the pleasure which will come in the agony of self-immolation, and for an ultimate peace in extinction.

Even the structural parallels to *Paradise Lost* do not help to clarify the moral significance of the action because Frankenstein must be seen as both the creator and the fallen angel, and the monster as both Adam and Satan. Whereas Frankenstein insistently excuses himself (or, at best, fails to admit his guilt publicly) and sees the monster as embodied evil, the fact is that (as each admits about the other on occasion) they are both agents of good *and* evil. Although there is little evidence besides the love he inspires and his own sense of his virtue to prove Frankenstein's goodness, he is clearly not a wicked man in the tradition of melodrama or the gothic. Unlike Melmoth the Wanderer, he has made no pact with the devil. His vices are the defects of his virtues: it was the desire both for glory and to aid mankind that led him to create the monster. As the monster describes him, ambiguously but with clear evidence of admiration: "O Generous and self-devoted being."

As in much realistic fiction, there is no wholly evil character in *Frankenstein*, but, at the same time, there is evil in the world. Frankenstein locates it in the monster; the monster locates it in Frankenstein and, more abstractly, in man. The monster, of course, in his hideousness and in his violent acts, can be seen as the objectification of evil in Frankenstein's mind. But this is far too simple. Frankenstein is sickened with guilt at the murders and feels, in a way and justly, responsible for them. Yet, until after the death of Elizabeth, on the night of their wedding, he never admits to anyone that he has created the monster, and he produces time after time (even when it costs Justine her life) elaborate rationalizations to keep from confessing. Looked at abstractly, Frankenstein's guilt might be said to reside in the act of creating the monster. But there are few occasions in the book where this view becomes the focus. The arguments of the monster and the action of the narrative suggest far more concretely and powerfully that the evil resides not so much in the creation of the monster—which is where the modern popularized myth of Frankenstein places the blame—but in Frankenstein's failure to take the responsibility for what he has created. His first response to the monster on seeing his hideous but quite touching filial grin is to flee: "He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped, and rushed down stairs. I took refuge in the courtyard" (p. 58). Throughout the novel Frankenstein hides from the consequences of his actions so that, to make him face his responsibilities, his own creation must make those actions more and more inescapable. Frankenstein does not see his creation a second time until after it has killed his brother.

There is no evidence in the early stages of anything essentially evil in the mon-

ster, and on the strength of his own narrative six chapters later, it is clear that the monster, like Frankenstein himself, was full of benevolence and affection. His only crime is his ugliness, and this is entirely the work of Frankenstein who has been careless in his haste of creation. The monster is evil not because of what he intrinsically is, but because of the consequences of Frankenstein's obsession with creating him. In his obsession, Frankenstein has cut himself off from his family and from the human community; in his reaction to that obsession, Frankenstein cuts himself off from his creation. To be sure, Frankenstein has overreached himself: "Oh! no mortal could support the horror of that countenance" (p. 58). Implicitly, that is, only God should undertake the responsibility of creation. But the true sin is not against God, is not really the Promethean theft of fire from Heaven, but against himself and the human community. Frankenstein cannot face directly that aspect of himself which could create the monster—his own capacity for evil. He sins against his father and his son, and in so doing, he sins against himself. The true sin is his refusal even to attempt to recognize and then to cope with his own capacity for evil. Interestingly, he never learns to do so, but tries to destroy that capacity while, in so doing, he only revitalizes it (and this is, of course, made objectively true by the monster's need to be pursued). To his death he is obsessed with vengeance and destruction as, in his youth, he had been obsessed with creation and benevolence. In this strange book, these are two aspects of the same thing.

The real mystery in *Frankenstein* then has little to do with the mysteries of the gothic machinery. Rather, it has to do with the problem of where the evil came from in the first place. As we shall see, the novel provides a Godwinian explanation for the monster's actual evil, but the underlying structure of the book implies an irrational and dangerous world, which cannot be comprehended by rational theory and which is strained with enormous energies latent and repressed. The surrender to the passionate, however generous and benevolent the apparent intentions, releases those energies; and these break loose in ways altogether independent of any character. Frankenstein, after all, has suffered none of the injustices from which the monster suffers. He has been loved, encouraged by his family, and given the gift of a lifelong companion. Yet he is the original agent of evil. Frankenstein's final reason for not creating a bride for his monster is that he fears—and the whole narrative implies the justice of these fears—that the new monster will not feel herself bound by the original monster's own good intentions. But beyond this mystery, which novelists committed to the realist tradition tended to ignore, or explain in terms of egoism, the explicit moral ideals of *Frankenstein* are very close to those of realism: the ideals of compromise, moderation, commitment to family and community.

Where in Frankenstein's story there seems no rational explanation for the entrance of evil into the world, in the monster's the explanation is clear. The monster's story implies the primacy of responsibility to family and community and his arguments are keenly rational, Godwinian polemics which, in almost every case, are superior to the responses of Frankenstein, who is ruled by vague but powerful emotions. "Yet you, my creator, detest and spurn me . . .," cries the

monster, "to whom thou art bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us. You purpose to kill me. How dare you sport thus with life?" (p. 99). Amidst all the extraordinary reversals in this novel, perhaps the most startling is the way the monster becomes, at least in dramatized action, the intellectual and, indeed, moral superior of Frankenstein. The audacity of a murderer accusing his pursuer of "sporting with life"! The monster nevertheless vows his devotion and docility to Frankenstein: "I am thy creature, and I will be even mild and docile to my natural lord and king, if thou wilt also perform thy part, the which thou owest me. . . . Remember, that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous" (p. 100). I suppose that this sort of moral lecturing, hectoring, and condescension might have tried the spirit of greater men than Frankenstein. But Frankenstein's response is to reject as specious ideas that much of the narrative enforces. The case is all the monster's—except that in his Godwinian naïveté, he doesn't fully understand the power of irrational energies which he himself enacts. The monster is, however, simply pleading against the injustice of man and his institutions, and for what each nineteenth-century fictional orphan wants—new parents, someone to love and rely on, justice, a place in which to define himself and be happy.

"Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous." The point is a political one, of course, and much of the monster's experience exemplifies the view that evil enters man's spirit as a result of the injustice of other men (though this is a circular and inconclusive argument). Man is born naturally good, and there is every evidence that the monster's heart is in the right place (after all, it was put there by Frankenstein). The monster represents a kind of Dickensian reading (almost Carlylean but that Carlyle, if an admirer of Rousseau, still found it difficult to believe in man's natural goodness) of the French Revolution. Abused, abandoned, maltreated, deprived, he turns in vengeance on his master and on everything associated with his master. The violent energies released by the revolution enact, in the Terror, the evil that has its apparent source in the masters' injustice. The center of evil is parental irresponsibility and selfishness, and the ideal of goodness is the father's bond to his son and the reciprocal bond of son to father. As the aristocracy in France betrayed the people, so Frankenstein betrayed his creation and, at the same time, in cutting himself off from his own family, betrayed his father as well.

The model of the family is imposed, in *Frankenstein*, on society itself. Thus, like Thackeray's Henry Esmond (who, in marrying the woman who takes the place of his mother, acts out in definitive form the ideal implied in *Frankenstein*), like Dickens's Florence Dombey, like George Eliot's Daniel Deronda, the monster seeks a bond to take the place of the natural one with his creator, without which he is doomed to rootlessness and a meaningless existence. Without such connections, the monster asks himself questions like those of any good modern anti-hero: "Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?" (p. 128). As we look through the novel, we discover that the injustice to the monster is acted out in many other relations and, certainly, in human institutions.

Justine is forced by her father confessor to confess a crime she didn't commit, and she is hanged. Safie's father betrays her and her lover and the DeLacey family is wrongly condemned: Felix turns on the monster who had been assisting him and his family for months and the monster discovers "the system" on which society is based—"The division of property, of immense wealth and squalid poverty, of rank, descent and noble blood."

None of the characters comfortable in domestic harmony can believe that the world is governed unjustly until disaster strikes. And this is true even of the monster, who enjoys domestic bliss only by peering into the DeLaceys' window. When Elizabeth weeps for Justine before the hanging, she is comforted by Frankenstein's father, who says, "If she is, as you believe, innocent, rely on the justice of our law" (p. 81). But experience brings knowledge and one of the novel's themes is the danger of knowledge. In the realistic novel, knowledge entails disenchantment, a recognition of one's own limits, of the injustice pervasive in society, and of the power of society over one's own ambitions. Thus, the characteristic realistic hero ends his story in some sort of compromise (though he is usually eased, in his fate, by marriage to a lovely creature). But *Frankenstein*, working in a different mode, does not allow a lapse into worldly wisdom and moderation. It deals with the motif of knowledge and innocence and disenchantment on a scale far larger than that of the conventional *bildungsroman*. Frankenstein's quest for knowledge can be seen as a dramatic metaphor for the universal condition of lost innocence as a result of the knowledge of experience. It is not merely Frankenstein in this novel who becomes disenchanted: each major character learns something of the nature of his own illusions. As the reality of death (which is really the product of Frankenstein's knowledge) enters the almost idyllic household of Frankenstein's family, the romance of domestic harmony gives way to a deep gloom. What happens to Frankenstein in his pursuit of knowledge happens, inescapably, to everyone no matter how safe or how good he may seem.

Frankenstein may point the moral of his story to Walton: "Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow" (p. 53). But this moral—particularly appropriate to the realistic novel—is argued very ambivalently. Even the monster repeats the argument (as he must, being Frankenstein's alter ego): "Increase of knowledge only discovered to me more clearly what a wretched outcast I was" (p. 131). As his knowledge grows, he cries out: "Oh, that I had for ever remained in my native wood, nor known nor felt beyond the sensation of hunger, thirst, and heat!" (p. 120). Yet Mary Shelley knows, as the monster learned, that there is no returning to innocence, once it is lost. "Of what a strange nature is knowledge! It clings to the mind, when it has once seized on it, like a lichen on the rock. I wished sometimes to shake off all thought and feeling; but I learned that there was but one means to overcome the sensation of pain, and that was death" (p. 120). And Frankenstein, near the end, cannot even insist unambiguously on the moral of his story. His last speech is a masterpiece of doubt: "Farewell, Walton!" he says. "Seek happiness in tranquility,

and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed." Death is the only resolution and yet it resolves nothing since knowledge and innocence are continuing aspects of human experience. The tension worked out in *Frankenstein* between ambition and natural harmony is not resolved.

## II

If we read the novel as anti-heroic (which it frequently is, quite explicitly) we miss its peculiar power, its relevance to more conventionally mimetic novels that followed it and, I think, to our present condition in a society which seems almost damned by its own ambition. Frankenstein is not the stock figure of the mad scientist that he has become in modern science fiction films, partly because his potential destructiveness is an inevitable aspect of quite remarkable powers for goodness and of generous intentions, but partly also because the novel he lives in forces us to recognize that we cannot destroy the monster without destroying ourselves, that we cannot forget what we know. The novel faces frankly, moreover (in a way that even Dickens tried not to do) that the monstrous in us can be both beautiful and generous. It struggles to be anti-intellectual, but cannot be. It struggles to assert the supremacy of domestic peace, but cannot altogether succeed. By following out the consequences of the gothic form, by freeing her characters from the full constricting effects both of nature and society, Mary Shelley reveals to us quite clearly the tensions that underlay the Victorian fictional compromise. The ideal of familial responsibility and love is always partly violated because one's fullness as a separate human being entails that violation. And as for the family, so for society. We can't live without it, but we can't live with it.

As a hero, Frankenstein is freed from the restraints of society usually imposed by the very texture of realism. He actually succeeds in creating what he desires, only to find that he doesn't desire it. But we can see here that the freedom is as illusory as Dorothea Brooke's or Isabel Archer's, that the pressures which, in realistic novels, seem to be imposed by a constricting society, are here imposed by the minimal condition of man—the condition, that is, of sentience and of family ties. "Alas!" says Frankenstein, "why does man boast of sensibilities superior to those apparent in the brute; it only renders them more necessary beings" (p. 97). Social pressures in fiction can frequently, if not always, be taken as objectifications of subjective states of feeling and being. In Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, for example, it is possible to blame Jude's fate on a backward and oppressive society. But the full power of the book lies in the fact that Jude is destroyed as much by his own instincts as by society. Hardy's consistent lament at the unsuitability of man to the natural world is altogether in keeping with Frankenstein's vision here. And Lydgate's fall, we remember, though it has extraordinarily complicated social sources and implications, is as much the result of his own nature as of society's. *Frankenstein* gives us an opportunity to examine the energies of restraint and

self-destruction that are built into the human condition precisely because it is not a social novel, because it does not work in the realist mode which depends so heavily on surfaces and the complexities of social relations and the multiplicity of things. In both worlds, freedom is illusory, responsibility is inevitable.

In both worlds, as I have already suggested, the domestic ideal is central, and in both worlds, the hero's relation to it is ambivalent. Frankenstein alternately desires, above all things, to return to the bosom of his family, and then yearns to do something great which will cut him off from the family. That Walton can be saved makes him a lesser man, and there is even a hint that he will not be saved: "Thus are my hopes blasted by cowardice and indecision; I come back ignorant and disappointed. It requires more philosophy than I possess to bear this injustice with patience" (p. 215). Yet he is absolved of guilt while Frankenstein must see himself as the most guilty of beings as long as he does not face the reality of his actions and desires. Only confession, some public recognition of guilt, could possibly have reabsorbed Frankenstein into the human community. But even at Frankenstein's death, with his confession to Walton, we do not have the full absolution because the past is irrevocable and indestructible except in death itself. As he attempts to face what he has done, he moves beyond guilt to a position largely inconceivable in realistic fiction. He does not, he says, find his past conduct "blameable." Guilt is an aspect of repression, and where the realist mode entails repression, Mary Shelley's mode frees her characters into a full accordance with their own deepest feelings. Frankenstein almost callously accepts his past and his ambitions: in the cool language of moral calculus he simply comes to recognize the impossibility of his having avoided disaster. Here is his quiet retrospect on his career, and we can note in the cool abstract language and in the logical balancing of the sentences how far this is from a statement possible within the realist conventions:

*During these last days I have been occupied in examining my past conduct; nor do I find it blameable. In a fit of enthusiastic madness I created a rational creature, and was bound towards him, to assure, as far as was in my power, his happiness and well-being. This was my duty; but there was another still paramount to that. My duties towards the beings of my own species had greater claims to my attention, because they included a greater proportion of happiness or misery. (p. 217)*

It is partly to avoid the horror of this kind of insight that the realist novel erects its defenses against excess and ambition, and employs a prose both less calculating and abstract and more preoccupied with quotidian details.

*Frankenstein* spells out both the horror of going ahead and the emptiness of return. In particular, it spells out the price of heroism, a price which most nineteenth-century novelists were not willing to pay. Heroism is personal satisfaction writ large. That is, it implies the importance and the power of the individual human being, not in the web of responsibilities which constitute personal action within his family and society and which deter him from all but the most compromised



and therefore moderate satisfactions, but in the testing and fulfillment of personal powers. To test is to risk loss and, of course, disenchantment with self. To risk the test is to cut the cord, to assert one's selfhood as a being independent of others. The alternative to the test is repression of self, the establishment of constraints for the sake of order and peace. *Frankenstein* is, in a way, about cutting the cord, and in its treatment of the problem it offers no comforting solution, only the knowledge that there is no way to return to the womb.

This leads to one final point about Frankenstein as a hero, and as a type of the realist hero. His unattractiveness to the reader as a hero is, I think, the result of three qualities. The first is precisely his obsession with great action. As he is obsessed he is also necessarily cruel and turns away from his responsibilities; and, as we have seen, it is with a new sense of these responsibilities that he dies. The second is that he is really unequal to his own ambitions. He has the technical power to create the monster, but he has not the moral power to cope with his creation. In this respect, he is rather like Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov, though dispassionately treated, without the psychological intimacy that makes us participate in Raskolnikov's weaknesses so that we can recognize them as our own (and this, I think, is one of the great weaknesses of Mary Shelley's book). But the third is more central to my immediate concern here. It is the nature of his behavior when he undergoes one of his regular spasms of desire to return to the virtues of domesticity, "the amiableness of domestic affection." On these occasions, Frankenstein is the passive hero.

As an ambitious hero, he wants to change things, to improve them, and much of the novel, as I have pointed out, regards the mechanisms of society as cruel and unjust. But the notion of domestic affections and of the need for communal and family ties runs deeply through the novel, and as Frankenstein longs for these, his ambition drops away and he falls into inaction. There are any number of examples of this sort of thing. The whole narrative reveals that Frankenstein, as an active figure, does only two things: he acts obsessively in creating the monster (and it should be noted that even here he insists on his passivity before fate—this provides the moral excuse); and, at the end, he acts obsessively (and ineffectually) in pursuing him. This last act is an attempt to destroy the fruits of his own ambitions. The passivity is most painful when he retreats from recognition of the evil he has created and allows Justine to die. But his initial flight from the monster is also a supreme passive act: if you don't see it, it's not there, as Jack Burden says in *All the King's Men*. After Frankenstein flees from the aborted attempt to create a mate for the monster, he glides into one of the scenes that will become typical of Victorian fiction. He finds himself on a boat which drifts beyond his control in a storm, and he comes ashore at precisely the place where the monster has just killed Clerval. His response to this is to fall into one of his characteristic illnesses that render him powerless, that return him to the helplessness of infancy and to the care of his father and family. We find in *Frankenstein*, in other words, that the passivity of the hero is not only to be explained by the ideals of prudence and domestic harmony and natural affection, or the ideal of the civilized community, but by the irrational need to escape the consequences of

adulthood, to retreat to the innocence and helplessness of the womb where the heroic expression of selfhood is denied and replaced by the comfort of dependence and the absorption of the love of others.

Thus *Frankenstein* provides us with a hero whose being, in every aspect, expresses precisely those tensions which are to preoccupy later English novelists, and Frankenstein enacts not only the role of the realist hero but the alternatives to that role which do much to explain the characteristic shape of realist fiction. The failure of Frankenstein to destroy his knowledge and to retreat to innocence foreshadows, I think, the ultimate self-destruction of realist techniques. Of course, this is a dangerously oversimple generalization, and puts rather a heavy burden on a novel which makes no such claims. But studying *Frankenstein* can help us to understand some of the powerful and inexplicit energies that lie beneath the surface of realist fiction in England and can help explain both the pervasive resistance to and distrust of ambition and energy in its heroes—their strange dullness and inadequacy—and the equally strange and subversive fascination with ambition and evil energies. Who would prefer Amelia Sedley to Becky Sharp, or Little Nell to Quilp, or Daniel Deronda to Grandcourt? The irrational is latent in every important English realist novel, and within every hero there is a Frankenstein—or his monster—waiting to get out.