

The Critical Metamorphoses of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

WILLIAM CHRISTIE

You must excuse a trifling deviation,
From Mrs. Shelley's marvellous
narration

— from the musical *Frankenstein; or,
The Vampire's Victim* (1849)

Like Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, who erupts into Mary Shelley's text as occasionally and inevitably as the Monster into Victor Frankenstein's life, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* passes, like night, from land to land and with stangely adaptable powers of speech addresses itself to a critical audience that is larger and more diverse than that of almost any other work of literature in English:

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is famously reinterpretable. It can be a late version of the Faust myth, or an early version of the modern myth of the mad scientist; the id on the rampage, the proletariat running amok, or what happens when a man tries to have a baby without a woman. Mary Shelley invites speculation, and in the last generation has been rewarded with a great deal of it.¹

How far we wedding guests have attended to what *Frankenstein* has to say and how far simply and unashamedly bound it to our own purposes is a moot point. Still, the fact that it can be — has been — read to mean so many things in its comparatively short life is what makes the novel especially fascinating and challenging. And I am concerned in this article only with the extent and variety of the academic critical attention *Frankenstein* has received; only with what we might call its 'critical metamorphoses'. If we were to add to these critical metamorphoses *all* adaptations of the novel or myth in fiction, on stage, in the cinema and in retail, then the number of metamorphoses or different versions is quite literally incomprehensible: impossible to get around, to encircle and take

in. Mary Shelley's older contemporary, the literary satirist Thomas Mathias observed that Gothic novels 'propagated their species with unequalled fecundity' and left their 'spawn' in every bookshop, but Mary Shelley's creation has spawned with a Malthusian menace of which Mathias could not even have conceived.² Indeed, *we* cannot conceive of it. Already, for example, it is quite simply impossible for any one individual to pursue every reference to 'Frankenstein' on the internet in his or her lifetime. The forms these metamorphoses have taken, the degree of familiarity with the original story they betray, have varied enormously.³ Still, however, they can all be said to have originated in Mary Shelley's novel of 1818 or its revised edition of 1831.

In literary criticism and literary history, as it happens, this restless metamorphosis has not always been the case. Popularizations and parodies have continued unabated since *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein* took to the London stage in July 1823,⁴ but until thirty years ago *Frankenstein* drew from literary critics only an occasional, parenthetical reference to its well-meaning ineptitude. *Frankenstein* was cited as 'an interesting example of Romantic myth-making, a work ancillary to such established Promethean masterpieces as Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* and Byron's *Manfred*', to quote Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and Mary Shelley herself only acknowledged because of the 'literary/familial relationships' she represented.⁵ Gilbert and Gubar may well have had in mind Harold Bloom's influential visionary hierarchy:

what makes *Frankenstein* an important book, though it is only a strong, flawed novel with frequent clumsiness in its narrative and characterization, is that it contains one of the most vivid versions we have of the Romantic mythology of the self, one that resembles Blake's *Book of Urizen*, Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* and Byron's *Manfred*, among other works. Because it lacks the sophistication and imaginative complexity of such works, *Frankenstein* affords a unique introduction to the archetypal world of the Romantics.⁶

By saying badly what the canonical male Romantic poets were saying well, *Frankenstein* was thought to function at once to justify their canonization and to illuminate the otherwise difficult, self-reflexive enterprise of Romanticism. Where Blake and Shelley and Byron wrote of Romanticism from the vexed inside, that is, Mary Shelley offered what was at best a simplified version from the outside, at worst 'a passive

reflection of some of the wild fantasies which, as it were, hung in the air about her' (Mario Praz)⁷. 'Like almost everything else about her life, *Frankenstein* is an instance of genius observed and admired but not shared', according to Robert Kiely;⁸ 'one of those second-rate works', declared D. W. Harding, 'written under the influence of more distinguished minds'.⁹

Thanks largely to some Copernican changes in our critical universe, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* now has a reputation commensurate with the looming bulk of its own Monster, having been unofficially canonized by the sheer variety and extent of interpretative activity that it has inspired over the last thirty years. This article offers a critical map of that activity, asking what in its nature and extent it might have to say about *Frankenstein* itself, as well as about the critical conditions under which Mary Shelley's novel has gone forth and multiplied.

I

I have said that *Frankenstein* has spawned a literally incomprehensible number of different interpretations. For all that, however, and especially amongst a general public apprized of the myth but innocent of the novel, there remains a remarkable consensus — as Marilyn Butler points out: 'Readers, filmgoers, people who are neither, take the very word *Frankenstein* to convey an awful warning: don't usurp God's prerogative in the Creation-game, or don't get too clever with technology'.¹⁰ God's prerogative; Nature's prerogative; History's prerogative; the prerogative of the conservative, self-correcting principles internal to Evolution — the precise providential scheme is less important than its self-licensed priority and the sense of violation offered by experiments like Victor Frankenstein's. This understanding by the general public of the *Frankenstein* myth as a fable of technologico-scientific irresponsibility — from the Monster as 'a simulacrum of industrialized reproduction'¹¹ to nuclear physics and biological cloning¹² — is one of two readings which literary criticism has been content to share, even to take for granted. 'The Monster', Martin Tropp reminds us, 'has been called the ancestor of "all the shambling horde of modern robots and androids" in science-fiction', while *Frankenstein* has engendered 'a whole range of demented scientists, from Dr Strangelove to the Saturday morning cartoon madmen whose symptoms include unruly hair, a persistent cackle, and the

desire to (dare I say it?) “rule the world!”’: ‘Mad scientist and monster are figures in a modern myth; they reflect our fears about the future of man in a world of machines’.¹³

Since 1980 *Frankenstein* has been resituated along with all the other literature of the Romantic period by New and old forms of historicism in a progressively more detailed recreation of the complex and interrelated cultures of that period. And this is nowhere more apparent than with the culture of the experimental and theoretical sciences of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The general scientific ‘background’ to *Frankenstein* is explored at length in a monograph by Samuel Vasbinder and in Anne Mellor’s discussion of the novel as ‘A Feminist Critique of Science’: ‘Mary Shelley based Victor Frankenstein’s attempt to create a new species from dead organic matter through the use of chemistry and electricity on the most advanced scientific research of the early nineteenth century. Her vision of the isolated scientist discovering the secret of life is no mere fantasy but a plausible prediction of what science might accomplish’.¹⁴ Moving beyond Mellor’s more abstract approach to the history and philosophy of science, however — on the conviction that (to quote Marilyn Butler) ‘the academic reading-list needs qualifying or replacing with a form of newspaper and journal-talk which *could* be thought of as current language’¹⁵ — many recent essays have focussed more intensively on Mary Shelley’s and the novel’s relation to the immediate discoveries and controversies of the contemporary scientific world:

The fluid boundary between death and life — a dominant theme in the bio-medical sciences of this time — was of such importance that Frankenstein imagined that, in time, he might be able to ‘renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption’. The belief that the boundary between life and death was reversible was widely held at the time, indeed for most of the eighteenth century there had been sustained interest in suspended animation, techniques for reviving the drowned and the hanged, premature burial — indeed in any aspect of medicine that held out the hope that death could be delayed, avoided, held at bay. Medical writers imagined doctors in a quasi-divine role, shedding new light on nature’s processes.¹⁶

Ludmilla Jordanova, from whom I quote, reads into Victor Frankenstein’s researches and attitude ‘the fantasies of (at least some) medical

practitioners of the time’ — ‘a new breed of metropolitan medical men’ — and their struggle to create ‘a *culture* of medical and scientific power’ as ‘one way of securing power itself’. To highlight the issue of the social pathology of the profession and relate it to the critical preoccupation with the ‘birth myth’ in *Frankenstein* that I discuss below, Jordanova focusses her discussion on the controversy of ‘man midwifery’.¹⁷ Butler, on the other hand, traces more narrowly the flux and reflux of ‘the vitalist debate’ over the years of the novel’s intellectual gestation, concentrating on the Shelleys’ relationship with one of its more articulate participants, William Lawrence, and showing how the very language of this often personal and always political debate enters the novel.¹⁸

One thing that becomes increasingly apparent the closer that scholarship brings us to Regency Britain, especially to the hybrid ‘science’ of medical practice and its day to day, often *ad hoc* procedures, is that any line drawn between the Gothic on the one hand, and the theory and practice of the empirical sciences in the early nineteenth century on the other, must remain tentative. The title of Tim Marshall’s recent study says it all: *Murdering to Dissect: Grave-Robbing, Frankenstein, and the Anatomy Literature*.¹⁹ The closer we come to such historical phenomena as the 1832 Anatomy Act, in other words, the more history, both as the past itself and as a narrative of the past, becomes a Gothic genre. And the Gothicization of history — in this case the teaching and practice of anatomy and surgery — serves simultaneously to de-Gothicize episodes like the following in *Frankenstein*:

Now I was led to examine the cause and progress of this decay, and forced to spend days and nights in vaults and charnel houses. My attention was fixed upon every object the most insupportable to the delicacy of the human feelings. I saw how the fine form of man was degraded and wasted; I beheld the corruption of death succeed to the blooming cheek of life; I saw how the worm inherited the wonders of the eye and brain. I paused, examining and analysing all the minutiae of causation, as exemplified in the change from life to death, and death to life, until from the midst of this darkness a sudden light broke in upon me . . . (p. 35)

So it is with the many other, less sensational studies that similarly move to demystify the text — in literary terms, to de-Romanticize it — by bringing it back into a precisely unsensational relation to the social and political

quotidian. The point they make and remake is the point that Mary Shelley herself stressed in her 1831 introduction, that invention ‘does not consist in creating out of void’; that ‘the *materials* must, in the first place, be afforded’.²⁰ Of the revolutions effected in our understanding of *Frankenstein* over the last thirty years, this move to demystify the story by refiguring it within the rich context of those historical materials that were afforded may well prove, because of historicism’s own ‘empirical’ methodology, the most lasting.

Though at a cost, it seems to me. Victor Frankenstein may be neither archetype nor psychopath and may have shared his arrogance and researches with a number of Mary Shelley’s contemporaries — after all, the ‘projectors’ in Swift’s Academy of Lagado were carrying out experiments that had been performed by members of the Royal Society. But Mary Shelley’s Monster, like Swift’s Laputans, steps out of another imaginative realm altogether, and this in spite of all the authentic wild, unnurtured and untutored ‘noble savages’ that roamed the pages of Enlightenment speculation on psychology and education. Jordanova protests defensively that she is ‘not claiming for *Frankenstein* some kind of “documentary” status it does not possess’, but in doing so betrays the danger of an historical reconstruction so thoroughgoing that the text disappears into the material conditions that produced it or the reconstruction itself becomes nothing more than a theoretically sophisticated search for sources and analogues. It is one thing to attend to *Frankenstein*’s running argument with contemporary reviewers and another thing to allow it ‘to speak to the mysterious fears of our nature, and awaken thrilling horror’ as Mary Shelley certainly hoped it would (p. 195).

II

The other interpretation literary critics have been content to share with the general public is of *Frankenstein* as a political fable, a reading that became idiomatic soon after publication and one that dominated nineteenth-century usage.²¹ ‘Like her father’, writes biographer William St Clair, Mary Shelley ‘provided a metaphor for the upheavals of the age. The phrase “to create a Frankenstein monster” was to become a nineteenth-century political cliché’.²² In this, the Monster is seen either as a composite symbol of the lower classes or, more often, as symbolizing an

historically specific, especially unruly section of the lower classes turning threateningly on their social superiors. The poet Shelley exonerated the revolutionary psychology while revealing the allegorical key to this family of readings in a review of *Frankenstein* that remained unpublished in his lifetime:

nor are the crimes and malevolence of the single Being, though indeed withering and tremendous, the offspring of any unaccountable propensity to evil, but flow irresistibly from certain causes fully adequate to their production. They are the children, as it were, of Necessity and Human Nature. In this the direct moral of the book consists, and it is perhaps the most important and of the most universal application of any moral that can be enforced by example — Treat a person ill, and he will become wicked. Requite affection with scorn; let one being be selected, for whatever cause, as the refuse of his kind — divide him, a social being, from society, and you impose upon him the irresistible obligations — malevolence and selfishness²³

For Shelley's and subsequent radical readings, monstrous intimidation follows necessarily from equally monstrous and dehumanizing neglect. '“Oh, Frankenstein”', protests the Monster to his maker, '“be not equitable to every other, and trample upon me alone, to whom thy justice, and even thy clemency and affection, is most due. Remember, that I am your creature: I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed”' (pp. 77-8).

In the bulk of historico-political readings, *Frankenstein* 'is traversed with the images and effects of the French Revolution'.²⁴ Lee Sterrenberg, for example, cites intriguing detail like Mary Shelley's choice, in Ingolstadt, of a place that had been identified in the Abbé Barruel's *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism* (1797) and by Thomas Robison in his *Proofs of a Conspiracy* (1798) as the home of a secret society called *Illuminati* and thus as the intellectual cradle of the French Revolution.²⁵ Chris Baldick, on the other hand, traces the accusation of monstrosity back and forth between anti-Jacobin and Jacobin throughout the revolution controversy of the 1790s. *Frankenstein* is seen to participate in the battle for rhetorical supremacy instigated by 'the monster image' of filial ingratitude 'organizing, understanding, and at the same time preserving the chaotic and confused nature of the revolutionary events' in Edmund Burke's account in his *Reflections on the Revolution in*

France (1790).²⁶ Finally, Marie Roberts discovers an allegorical specificity, not in the historical origins of the novel, but in the political theory it proposes: ‘The dialectic between Victor and the monster may be understood in terms of Marx’s theory of alienation, part of which concerns mankind’s alienation from the product of its labour, seen in the estrangement of the monster from his maker. The creature has the characteristics of both worker and product, having been negated and alienated by capitalist society’.²⁷

Whether *Frankenstein* is interpreted as a Rousseauistic myth of innocence corrupted by society or — anachronistically, as in Roberts’s case — as a political economic myth of industrial capitalist expansion, socio-political readings are often seamlessly combined with readings of the novel as an allegory of the dangers of scientific-technological production out of control. The historical paradigms here were the machine-breaking Luddite uprisings in Nottinghamshire and the North, ‘and the Pentridge uprising of 1817’, revolts that according to Paul O’Flinn pressed directly on the Shelley-Byron circle and are figured in the clash between Frankenstein and his Monster. ‘The strength in the text’, for O’Flinn, is its sense of ‘the impact of technological developments on people’s lives and the possibility of working-class revolution’.²⁸ This may be amongst the things Ann Mellor has in mind when she says that Mary Shelley ‘initiated a new literary genre, what we now call science fiction’,²⁹ for the same fear of mechanization out of control informs the typical science-fiction dystopia of our own century: a sinister scientific technocracy whose success is built upon the marginalization and attempted dehumanization of the mass of the people — in *1984*, for example, and Huxley’s *Brave New World* through to the more recent cyberspace equivalents of William Gibson.

Like those readings that exhume the front-page scientists and medical practitioners of the time, political readings come most commonly from the historicists. In its determination to restore the text to the culture out of which it emerged, historicism reacts against any tendency to read the text as a universal myth, a tendency it identifies as (irresponsibly) Romantic. Two difficulties with historico-political readings of *Frankenstein* are worth mentioning before we leave them, however — besides the one I mentioned earlier of substituting for the text the conditions of its production. The first is one of evidence — not a lack, but a surfeit of evidence. Moves to read the text back into its specific context

can always find ample objects and occasions, given that in *any* period there is more going on than we can ever assimilate and organize historically. In the early nineteenth century this was, if anything, only more urgently and self-consciously the case. The fact that the Shelleys and the Godwins were argumentatively and actively engaged in contemporary political and print culture makes little that was said and done during the period irrelevant to a genetics of *Frankenstein*. Not only is criticism obliged to offer evidence, then, but it is obliged to offer it in the face of the wealth of potentially relevant material that it has more or less consciously excluded from consideration.

There is an interesting moment in Gilbert's and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* in which a parenthetical attempt is made to determine the significance of the choice of 'William' for the name of Victor Frankenstein's murdered brother: his 'name is that of Mary Shelley's father, her half brother, and her son so that one can hardly decide to which male relative she may have been alluding'.³⁰ Gilbert and Gubar might have thrown in any number of Mary Shelley's friends, a handful of well known poets, and a huge percentage of the other males in a country where 'William' was the most popular Christian name. While none of this rules out the possibility of an allusion to one or more of the close relatives they mention, it surely serves to discipline the impulse to leap at any echo, for significance of this kind requires stricter laws of probability than *Frankenstein* is wont to invoke in its critics.

The second difficulty has to do with ideology — the ideology of the author or the novel, that is, for the critic's is less often in doubt. Where, exactly, does *Frankenstein* stand on the issue scientific experimentation? — on the development of the medical profession? — on the justice and significance of the French Revolution or the Luddite revolts? — and so on. Rephrased as an issue of critical method, however, the reservation I am expressing concerns a tendency in socio-political readings brilliantly and confidently to recreate the political culture and invoke the contentious issues without asking how far the novel endeavours to resolve them — and if it does so, how successful it is. Chris Baldick's utterly convincing location of the language of monstrosity within the discourse of revolution and reaction, for example, skirts the issue of whose side Mary Shelley is on in the debate (he is comparatively uninhibited in his characterization of Godwin's position). So it is with many other historical studies whose scholarship and critical relevance is never in

question. This reluctance to prosecute the enquiry may have something to do with the fact that the novel is more conservative than many of its modern academic critics are willing to admit. On the other hand, it may exemplify the ‘uncertainty concerning the status of Mary Shelley as a self-conscious artist’ that Pamela Clemit identifies as ‘a feature of *Frankenstein* criticism down to the present day’.³¹

III

We will return to the question of the variety and validity of interpretations of *Frankenstein* later. In the meantime, it is worth remarking how easily criticism has been able to politicize the Monster’s predicament as feminine, in spite of his nominal masculinity. For Gilbert and Gubar, for example, ‘the monster’s narrative is a philosophical meditation on what it means to be born without a “soul” or history, as well as an explanation of what it feels like to be a “filthy mass that move[s] and talk[s]”, a thing, an other, a creature of the second sex’³² — that sex which is not one, in Luce Irigaray’s terms. It is especially his ‘unique knowledge of what it is like to be born free of history’ that is said to ally the Monster with those whose pasts have been effaced or repressed: the slave; the colonized subject; the ‘nameless’ woman.³³ But the book is a woman’s and feminism has no room for other oppressions: ‘Though it has been disguised, buried, or miniaturized, femaleness — the gender definition of mothers and daughters, orphans and beggars, monsters and false creators — is at the heart of this apparently masculine book’.³⁴ And certainly the critical identification and exposition of the feminine preoccupations of this male-dominated text have given rise to some of the best, most various and intriguing critical readings of *Frankenstein* over the last twenty-odd years.

The mother of its feminist or female readings, Ellen Moers was the first to suggest that ‘*Frankenstein* is a birth myth, and one that was lodged in the novelist’s imagination, I am convinced, by the fact that she was herself a mother’. The obsession with birth is said to derive in large part from Mary Shelley’s traumatic experiences of loss in child birth — first of losing her mother, who died so soon after Mary Shelley’s own birth, then of losing children of her own — as well as from her more general knowledge of the potential dangers in pregnancy and giving birth faced by women at the time. But it is especially in Victor Frankenstein’s

abandonment of the Monster, writes Moers, 'where Mary Shelley's book is most interesting, most powerful, and most feminine':

in the motif of revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences. Most of the novel, roughly two of its three volumes, can be said to deal with the retribution visited upon monster and creator for deficient infant care. *Frankenstein* seems to be distinctly a *woman's* mythmaking on the subject of birth precisely because its emphasis is not upon what precedes birth, not upon birth itself, but upon what follows birth: the trauma of afterbirth.³⁵

Again, as in the various political readings which are in truth social versions of the same psychodrama, the most articulate in defence of this interpretation is the Monster himself: ' "Hateful day when I received life!", I exclaimed in agony. "Cursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust?" ' (p. 105). An often clear eyed and always eloquent interpreter speaking out of the narrative centre of the novel, the Monster in fact can be said to have pre-empted most of the allegorical readings of the novel.

Few critics follow Moers's precise emphases and most try to avoid the naively direct biographical equations she comes up with on occasion, yet the freedom with which she turned to women's issues proved liberating for feminist and non-feminist critical discussion of *Frankenstein* alike. Moers's 'birth myth' and Robert Kiely's reading of *Frankenstein* as 'a parable in which Victor Frankenstein's *hubris* lies not in his usurping the creative power of God, but in his attempt to usurp the power of women' became the central themes upon which feminist criticism worked its variations,³⁶ and feminism and psychoanalysis established a tacit conspiracy that has required the recognition, at the very least, of all subsequent criticism. In her reading of 'Frankenstein's Circumvention of the Maternal', Margaret Homans evolves the most searching and sustained example of this synthesis:

The novel is about the collision between androcentric and gynocentric theories of creation, a collision that results in the denigration of maternal child bearing through its circumvention by male creation. The novel presents Mary Shelley's response to the expectation, manifested in such poems as *Alastor* and *Paradise Lost*, that women

embody yet not embody male fantasies. At the same time, it expresses a woman's knowledge of the irrefutable independence of the body, both her own and those of the children that she produces, from projective male fantasy.³⁷

Also tacitly established, it must be admitted, besides the conspiracy of feminism and psychoanalysis, was the licence to use *Frankenstein* to say anything that needed to be said.

Again, as the readings of Moers and Homans make plain, Mary Shelley's own life has only added possibilities to an already suggestive text. The best of these readings, however, have been able to use biographical detail to reach beyond into the text itself. Perhaps the one that has managed most effectively to turn 'the elaborate, gothic psychodrama of her family' to its literary critical purposes is that of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Gilbert and Gubar proceed on the explicit assumption that a biographical reading of a novel by a young woman with Mary Shelley's experience and aspirations is also and necessarily a highly, if often awkwardly, *literary* reading. Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley's mind and novel offer 'a fictionalized rendition of the meaning of *Paradise Lost* to women' in which 'the part of Eve is all the parts': 'the monster's uniquely ahistorical birth, his literary anxieties, and the sense his readings (like Mary's) foster that he must have been parented, if at all, by *books*; not only all these traits but also his shuddering sense of deformity, his nauseating size, his namelessness, and his orphaned, motherless isolation link him with Eve and with Eve's double, Sin'.³⁸

How far *Frankenstein* is promoted as a feminist myth — as well as being a myth of miscreation written by a woman, that is — depends not just on how it is read but also on what feminism is taken to mean. As a powerful if oblique plea for an archetypal division of 'labour' focussing on Victor Frankenstein's 'usurpation of the role of mother' in bringing to birth,³⁹ for example, the story is a deeply conservative one, arguably reacting against strategic attempts by early feminists like the author's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, to play down or circumvent the issue of biological difference. Most readers, critical or otherwise, have noticed how 'women are conspicuously absent from the main action', and how passive and self-effacing those women that do appear are,⁴⁰ though Kate Ellis rightly notes that 'the female role as one of constant, self-sacrificing devotion to others' is ironized in the earlier, 1818 text.⁴¹ But 'because it

does not speak the language of feminist individualism which we have come to hail as the language of high feminism within English literature', to quote Gayatri Spivak, as a text of 'nascent feminism' it 'remains cryptic'.⁴² So for Gilbert and Gubar 'the tale of the blind rejection of women by misogynistic/Miltonic patriarchy' is the 'covert plot' of the novel only, and the closest it ever comes to a critique is merely to clarify the insuperable prejudices of the Miltonic myth — thus presumably serving to expose them to the more alert and motivated criticism of later commentators.⁴³

So it is with the reading of *Frankenstein* that might reasonably be called the orthodox feminist reading, one that with Mary Poovey sees the novel as calling into question 'the egotism that Mary Shelley associates with the artist's monstrous self-assertion':

As long as domestic relations govern an individual's affections, his or her desire will turn outward as love. But when the individual loses or leaves the regulating influence of relationship with others, imaginative energy always threatens to turn back upon itself, 'mark' all external objects as its own and to degenerate into 'gloomy and narrow reflections upon self'.⁴⁴

This is orthodox in the sense of its picking up one of the oldest motifs of Western literary culture in the overreacher, and orthodox also in the sense that it casts the feminine in an existentially conservative, even timorous role of the kind against which, again, Mary Wollstonecraft fought so eloquently in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Indeed, insofar as (to quote Christopher Small) 'Frankenstein himself is clearly and to some extent must intentionally have been a portrayal of Shelley' in a novel which is a meditation on miscreants,⁴⁵ then for proponents of this orthodox reading like Mary Poovey, Ann Mellor, and Margaret Homans⁴⁶ the feminist critique *is* a conservative critique. In Shelley, according to Ann Mellor, Mary Shelley perceived 'an intellectual hubris or belief in the supreme importance of abstractions that led him to be insensitive to the feelings of those who did not share his ideas and his enthusiasms'.⁴⁷

There is no unqualified or uncritical intellectual hubris in the work of Shelley, as it happens, or in that of any other Romantic poet for that matter, which is only to say that *Frankenstein* might more faithfully be seen as taking its place beside *Alastor* and *Julian and Maddalo* and *The*

Triumph of Life as ironic or anticlimactic quest. If, as Paul Cantor argues, Mary Shelley ‘turned the creation myth back upon Romanticism’ to reveal ‘the dark underside to all the visionary dreams of remaking man that fired the imagination of Romantic myth-makers’, she had that in common with other Romantic myth-makers, not least her husband.⁴⁸

IV

Translated into the language of psychoanalysis, the Romantic egotism that Victor Frankenstein shared with Percy Bysshe Shelley becomes primal or ‘radical narcissism, a debilitating obsession with the self’.⁴⁹ For Joseph Kestner, narcissism was not only the distinguishing feature of the hero’s psychopathology, it was a structural principle in the text itself: ‘the *mise en abyme*, the story within the story’. Discussing the episode of Elizabeth’s murder on her and Victor’s wedding night, Kestner concludes that

Like Echo in the Greek myth, Elizabeth is destroyed by her Narcissus. The whole truth of this episode is that, fearing sexual contact, Frankenstein wanted the woman dead, desiring only to love himself, latently homosexual. The narcissistic Other (the Creature), by strangling Elizabeth, intervenes to prevent the normal separation of ‘ego-libido’ from ‘object-libido’ discussed by Freud in ‘On Narcissism’. Instead, Frankenstein’s libido is a narcissistic auto-erotism. Just as the face of the Creature had appeared when Frankenstein awoke from his dream about Elizabeth and his mother, so now does ‘the face of the monster’ grin at him through the inn window.⁵⁰

What is interesting here is that Kestner’s highly technical case history should amount substantially to the same reading as Mellor’s and Poovey’s. Indeed, most of the psychoanalytic approaches to the novel, and all of those that make Victor Frankenstein’s the central and mediating psyche, focus on one or more of what in Freud is a network of motifs and symptoms, partially invoked here by Kestner: narcissism; the mirror; impotence; autoeroticism; (latent) homosexuality; and so on.

The other common ingredient (again, usually part of the network) is the mother — Frankenstein’s or Mary Shelley’s or the Monster’s — the

more pressing an issue, as it turns out, in that in each case the mother is either dead or non-existent. Writing in answer to her question 'Is There a Woman in This Text?', Mary Jacobus rounds up the usual suspects: in exchanging 'a woman for a monster,' Victor Frankenstein prefers an imagined over an actual being (Romantic egotism) which is also, as Victor says, 'a being like myself' (primal narcissism), one that is tellingly created right after — and thus in obvious compensation for — the death of the egoistically rejected mother.⁵¹ So for Margaret Homans, *Frankenstein* 'is simultaneously about the death and obviation of the mother and about a son's quest for a substitute object of desire'.⁵² (In his film version of *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, Kenneth Branagh has Frankenstein bring Elizabeth back to life and dance with her a dance he had shared with his mother as a child.) In one way or other, writes Peter Brooks, 'the radically absent body of the mother more and more appears to be the "problem" that cannot be solved in the novel'.⁵³

Two vital pieces of evidence are invariably cited and discussed in this connection. One is the miniature portrait of the dead Caroline Frankenstein belonging to her son (and Victor's brother) William and used by the Monster to implicate Justine Moritz in William's murder; the other is Victor Frankenstein's post-natal nightmare, whose powerfully suggestive imagery compels critical speculation:

I was disturbed by the wildest dreams. I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed; when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window-shutters, I beheld the wretch — the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. (pp. 39-40)

Still on remarkably absent mothers, and like many others noting the maternal associations of the 'nature' into which Victor Frankenstein pries and penetrates, Marc Rubenstein focusses his analysis on Mary Shelley

and on her endeavours, as a guilt-ridden daughter feeling responsible for the death of her mother, to make restitution in a tale which Rubenstein interprets as a self-punitive acting out of her own destruction at the hands of her own child.⁵⁴

When Mary Shelley is not understood to be in quest for her dead mother, with ‘deep fears about an imbalance within herself’, she is seen as using the novel to disburden herself of a ‘muted hostility’, first, ‘toward her younger half-brother’ — who ‘unlike herself possessed a mother and, as a male, had received his father’s identity and approbation’ — and then toward the better known William Godwin, her father. The virtue of these accounts, like the one by U. C. Knoepfelmacher from which I quote, is the corrective they offer to readings that concentrate almost exclusively on the absent feminine, when males of various complexions dominate the text and Victor Frankenstein has the distinction of being not only a bad mother, but a bad father as well.⁵⁵

Finally, in the interpretative economy of critical psychoanalysis, fathers and sons, creators and creatures, have an uncanny habit of standing in for each other as discussion of parenthood or origins turns to the mutual reflexiveness of the various characters in the text. For Joseph Kestner, for example, the three-fold narrative framing highlights the similarities among what he calls ‘the three protagonists’ — Walton, Frankenstein, and the Monster — similarities ‘which signal their doubleness and otherness, the one the *doppelgänger* of the next, including their desire to explore, their failure to love, their loneliness, their avid reading, and their egoism’.⁵⁶ How far the origins of the Gothic motif of the shadow or *Doppelgänger* can be said to lie in narcissism, or in psychotic projection, and how far psychoanalytic theory is itself a development of the Gothic is a moot point, especially when it is Mary Shelley who is under analysis. If the presence of the double is ‘symptomatic’, a good many undiagnosed writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries must have shared Mary Shelley’s pathology, for as Martin Tropp suggests ‘such tales were popular at the time’.⁵⁷ Still, ‘almost every critic of *Frankenstein* has noted that Victor and his Monster are doubles’ (George Levine).⁵⁸ Here it is Victor Frankenstein rather than the Monster who pre-empt: ‘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’ (p. 57). Paul Cantor, in turn, explicates: ‘The monster

becomes Frankenstein's *Doppelgänger*, his double or shadow, acting out the deepest darkest urges of his soul, his aggressive impulses and working to murder one by one everybody close to his creator'.⁵⁹

The 'doubleness and otherness' Kestner typically sees as marking relations between the three main characters, Jerrold E. Hogle concentrates in the Monster, whose very hybridity as a composite of pieces sutured together in a 'workshop of filthy creation' (p. 36) is said to make him representative of an 'otherness' at once more capacious and more disturbing. Deferring to a principle of *ab-jection* derived from the psychoanalytic theory of Julia Kristeva — a self-defensive 'throwing from' of a 'dimly recalled and feared multiplicity' — Hogle reads the multiplicitous Monster as a displacement or scapegoat embodying the threat of an archetypal 'otherness':

The creature is a 'monster' in that it/he embodies and distances all that a society refuses to name — all the betwixt-and-between, even ambisexual, cross-class, and cross-cultural conditions of life that Western culture 'abjects', as Kristeva would put it — . . . It/he is 'the *absolutely* Other' . . . pointing immediately, as we have just seen, to intermixed and repressed states of being, the divisibility of the body, 'thrown-down' social groups, class struggles, gender-confusions, birth-moments, and death-drives . . . as well as to a cacophony of ideological and intertextual differences. All the while, though, he/it both re-presents each of these alterities and keeps them at a great remove by being quasi-human yet strictly artificial.

'The *absolutely* Other', Frankenstein's Monster has never been busier than he is here, in Hogle's *psychomachia* or battle of the soul. Rarely, moreover, has he borne so ponderous a symbolic burden, for his condition of being 'all of the betwixt-and-between . . . conditions of life' is said (again, after Julia Kristeva) to indicate 'the most primordial form of being half-"inside" and half-"outside"':

the 'heterogeneous flux' of being partly held inwards and partly pushed outwards by the mother's body at the moment of birth . . . *and* the state, at the same time, of emerging *out* of death (pre-natal non-existence) and starting to live *towards* death (the end point of all the 'want' that begins at birth . . .). This liminal condition of multiple

contradictions, where each supposedly distinct state slides over into its 'other', is the radical heterogeneity.⁶⁰

Like the Monster at its centre, the *Frankenstein* story can thus be characterized as a 'radical heterogeneity' that is inclusive enough to contain any and every possible meaning.

From here it is not far to reading the Monster, not as a mythical figure, but as a *source* of myth: an *Ur*-myth, as it were. Thus the claims that the Monster represents certain aspects of the human psyche, for example, or certain genders or races or social classes, or certain abstract ideas, or even (as with Hogle) a complex of 'alterities' — these claims are subordinated to the sheer fact of the Monster's illimitable suggestiveness. What follows from this suggestiveness are readings of *Frankenstein* as an allegory of making meaning or symbolizing: of metaphoricity; of mythopoesis; of making things *like*. Monstrously so, it would seem. For *like* the Monster, myth is made and released into culture, to undergo certain formative and deformative metamorphoses according to that culture's instinctual, ethical and spiritual needs or anxieties. But not only does this Monster/myth mean what it was intended to mean by its author or culture, it is also liable to get out of control and to assume an independent, even potentially destructive life of its own. For Beth Newman, for example, narrative and narrator in *Frankenstein* are 'emphatically separable', indeed psychologically and ethically disruptive of each other: 'once a narrative has been uttered, it exists as a verbal structure with its own integrity, and can, like myth, think itself in the minds of men (and women). Being infinitely repeatable in new contexts, it has achieved autonomy; it now functions as a text, divested of its originating voice'.

V

By extending the status of 'autonomy' from the framed tales within *Frankenstein* to the novel as a whole, Newman not only defends the independence of the *Frankenstein* myth, she also rather neatly underwrites her own determination to proceed with indifference to anything Mary Shelley might have intended and to trace in the text an autonomous concern 'with general tendencies in the nature of narrative itself'.⁶¹ According to Newman, *Frankenstein* is an essay in and on narrative. We

have shifted from *Frankenstein* as a map or drama of the psyche — whether Mary Shelley's or Victor Frankenstein's — to *Frankenstein* as a map of its own origins and constitution as a literary or mythic 'text'. There is a whole genre of critical approaches to *Frankenstein* in which, with competitive ingenuity, numerous critics have addressed themselves directly to what Gilbert and Gubar call 'the anxious pun on the word *author* so deeply embedded in *Frankenstein*'.⁶² In what for convenience we can call 'post-structuralist' readings, *Frankenstein* is revealed to be an allegory, not of Faustian 'epistemophilia' or revolutionary monstrosity or male arrogation of the birth privilege or primal narcissism or 'otherness', but of the act or scene either of writing or of literary criticism itself. Popular culture may want its mad scientist, but academic culture wants its *écriture*.

So for Fred Botting, 'the text, like the monster, solicits and resists attempts to determine a single line of significance', frustrating

the desires for authority that are represented in and resisted by the text-monster. Identifying the novel's fixed, singular and final meaning by way of historical and biographical archives, [certain] readings return to the unifying figure of the author as they attempt to authorize their own accounts and arrest the monstrously overdetermined play of significance that operates in and between criticism's 'pre-texts'. Thus they repeat Frankenstein's project. But the monster, this time *Frankenstein*, again eludes capture even as it sustains the pursuit.⁶³

The monstrous in *Frankenstein* is at once the source of and the explanation for the story's uninterpretability, an uninterpretability that nonetheless invites rather than discourages our vain attempts to interpret. This elusiveness prefigures the fate of meaning in post-structuralist theory, as the text turns into a Derridean nightmare of destabilizing *différance*: 'Difference, though constitutive of opposition, also exceeds it. The instability produced by monstrous difference offers no resting place for meaning and thus undermines the role of the literary critic, whose job it is to reveal authoritative meaning'.⁶⁴ *Frankenstein*, in short, discourses on its own discursive unmeaning.

In a comparable attempt to characterize the vain pursuit of meaning inside and outside the text, Peter Brooks invokes, not Jacques Derrida, but Jacques Lacan:

The Monster . . . attempts to state the object of his desire. In constructing his narrative appeal, he has contextualised desire, made it, or shown it to be, the very principle of narrative, in its metonymical forward movement. This movement, in Lacanian terms, corresponds to the slippage of the inaccessible signified — the object of unconscious desire — under the signifier in the signifying chain. . . .

Thus it is that the taint of monsterism, as the product of the unarrestable metonymic movement of desire through the narrative signifying chain, may ultimately come to rest with the reader of the text. . . . Perhaps it would be most accurate to say that we are left with a residue of desire *for* meaning, which we alone can realise.

The cynic might want to argue that to say that the reader's attention is driven by a desire to know that can never be satisfied completely is a blinding truism, not only about the act of narrating and reading but also about consciousness. And Brooks is aware of and slightly embarrassed by this: 'One could no doubt say something similar about any narrative text'. What makes the narrative of *Frankenstein* special for Brooks, however, is that, rather than being simply driven by a narrative whose principles it exposes, *Frankenstein* is *about* 'the very principle of narrative' — as it is for Beth Newman, only for Brooks it is narrative 'in its metonymical forward movement', dramatising 'the fact and process of its transmission, as "framed tales" always do'.⁶⁵ As an explanation of why it is that *Frankenstein* especially should engender such a proliferation of (necessarily inadequate) critical readings, Brooks's reading is at once self-affirming and curiously fatalistic: 'A monster is that which cannot be placed in any of the taxonomic schemes devised by the human mind to understand and to order nature. It exceeds the very basis of classification, language itself: it is an excess of signification, a strange byproduct or leftover of the process of making meaning'.⁶⁶ Because nothing exceeds like excess, the number and reach of critical readings of *Frankenstein* must be monstrous or disproportionate to anything signified by the text. As for Botting and Musselwhite, *Frankenstein* must mean beyond its own meaning.

Finally and more playfully, not only has the Monster been read post-structurally, so to speak, it has also been read as a prototype or prophecy of post-structuralism. According to Barbara Claire Freeman, there is a prescience in the anti-Kantian monstrosity of the text that is

figured, metonymically, in the creature's ill-fitting skin: 'comparable to the encasement of the sublime in Kantian theory'. By turning the Kantian sublime into the monstrous, Freeman argues, *Frankenstein* anticipates and encourages the explosion of 'theory' into the complacent world of academic philosophy and literature in the late twentieth century. A 'terrorism' effected 'by the texts of contemporary French theorists, especially Derrida', theory rages abroad, a Monster of the academy's own making and like to overpower the academy itself. *Frankenstein* turns out after all this time to have been a creative prophecy of the triumph of literary theory:

Like *Frankenstein's* Monster, theory devours whatever it encounters, be it a discourse, text, individual, or institution. The terroristic effect of theory, as of monstrosity, resides in its capacity to incorporate and swallow up another entity without leakage or cessation of appetite. Lately, deconstructive theory in particular has infiltrated and then devoured departments of language and literature, becoming the focus of attention, breaking down institutional divisions and domains. What terrorises those who oppose it — and even those who do not — is its totalising power and the rapidity with which it spreads, as if the university's immune system has no defence against it. . . . It is as if the future of the so-called Sciences of Man has been, or is in the process of being, monsterised by theory.⁶⁷

Freeman's invoking the popular genre of the campus horror film as a satire on the overreaction in the humanities to the advent of theory, while it good-humouredly endorses theory's deconstructive activities, also succeeds in exposing weaknesses in those activities of which she appears unconscious. Freeman, for example, unwittingly parodies the utterly indiscriminate tendency of theory to discover in any number of historically and generically distinct texts precisely the same preoccupation: its own. And the mock-horror of the campus Monster turns against the way in which the academy insists on writing its own existential anxieties large across a culture that, in truth, remains indifferent to and puzzled by them.

VI

I have looked only briefly at *Frankenstein* as a critique of an amoral curiosity in the empirical sciences and as a political allegory, and

have managed only a few of the many psychoanalytic and post-structuralist readings that have been lavished on it. What I hope to have conveyed in spite of these limitations, however, is the ‘dizzying profusion of meanings’ that *Frankenstein* has unleashed,⁶⁸ a profusion so remarkable that, where it does not actually enter into interpretation in ways that we have glimpsed, is invariably adverted to before the critic launches into the recovery of yet another meaning. It is a measure of just how extensive and various has been the critical attention devoted to the ‘famously reinterpretable’ *Frankenstein* that, in order to summarize my own summary of extant criticism, I can turn to the criticism itself and select any one of a huge number of such summaries — like Paul Sherwin’s of interpretations of the Monster:

If, for the orthodox Freudian, he is a type of the unconscious, for the Jungian he is a shadow, for the Lacanian an *objet à*, for one Romantic an ‘spectre’, for another a Blakean ‘emanation’; he has also been or can be read as Rousseau’s natural man, a Wordsworthian child of nature, the isolated Romantic rebel, the misunderstood revolutionary impulse, Mary Shelley’s abandoned baby self, her abandoned babe, an aberrant signifier, *différence*, or as a hypostasis of godless presumption, the monstrosity of godless nature, analytical reasoning, or alienating labour. Like the Creature’s own mythic version of himself, a freakish hybrid of Adam and Satan.⁶⁹

To which we can add: Eve, nameless woman, alienated labour, the colonized subject, the id, orgone energy, Frankenstein’s dark self or double — in short, anything and everything made (artificial), or formless, or multiform, or repressed, or oppressed, or just plain monstrous.

How far such mutually indifferent and sometimes even contradictory interpretations of the text should be tolerated and how far contested; how far an attempt should be made to integrate and reconcile them, is unfortunately itself a matter not just of interpretation — which recourse to the text, incidentally, however disciplined and ‘disinterested’, is unlikely to settle — but also of theoretical conviction. For some, like Fred Botting, ‘*Frankenstein* is a product of criticism, not a work of literature’.⁷⁰ We cannot talk of the critical metamorphoses of *Frankenstein*, in other words, because *Frankenstein* is nothing other than its critical metamorphoses. And yet, insofar as the act of interpretation is seen by Botting as necessarily and narcissistically refiguring the text to

suit its own preoccupations and anxieties, surely it shares an arrogance with Victor Frankenstein himself?

In an ingenious reading by Barbara Johnson, *Frankenstein* is identified as a myth of literary self-fashioning or autobiography. Victor Frankenstein's creating the Monster becomes for Johnson the first of two awkward attempts to shape a life according to his own needs and desires, an attempt in which the 'monster can thus be seen as a figure of autobiography as such'. The second attempt is the account of his activities that Victor Frankenstein gives to Walton, which assimilates events that are in themselves figurative to a self-exonerating narrative: '*Frankenstein* can be read as the story of autobiography as the attempt to neutralize the monstrosity of autobiography'.⁷¹ As a sophisticated critical tale within a critical tale, adapting psychoanalytic and mythic readings of what happens in *Frankenstein* to generic and narrative theory, Johnson's discussion is exemplary in both senses: at once characteristic and brilliant.

So brilliant, indeed so persuasive is her reading, in fact, that it is easy to overlook the self-professed arbitrariness implicit in the constructions 'can thus be seen as' and 'can be read as'. As figures of contemporary critical speech, these constructions are familiar enough and might be said merely to bear witness to Johnson's dismissal of any single, authoritative reading. But does there not inhere in them an indifference to the claims of the text, or a residual doubt as to the validity of such a reading? In what circumstances, say, or how faithfully, can Mary Shelley's novel be read in this way? '*From a certain point of view everything bears relationships of analogy, contiguity and similarity to everything else*', observes Umberto Eco.⁷² If *Frankenstein* means what it 'can be read as', is there not a risk of the meaningful becoming meaningless?

More to the point, however, is the question of how we can turn this excess of critical attention, not into a reading, but into an understanding of the text. One obvious thing about *Frankenstein*, for example, is that however convinced we may be about what the Monster symbolizes, say, or about what Victor Frankenstein might represent, we neither expect nor find that everything the two say and do conforms with that figuration. Gilbert and Gubar pause, searchingly, over this elusiveness:

If Victor Frankenstein can be likened to both Adam and Satan, who or what is he *really*? Here we are obliged to confront both the moral

ambiguity and the symbolic slipperiness which are at the heart of all the characterizations in *Frankenstein*. In fact, it is probably these continual and complex reallocations of meaning, among characters whose histories echo and re-echo each other, that have been so bewildering to critics. Like figures in a dream, all the people in *Frankenstein* have different bodies and somehow, horribly, the same face, or worse — the same two faces.⁷³

Nor is it possible to devise an allegorical reading comprehensive and supple enough to accommodate the existence and specific actions of the many secondary characters — the Swiss cast of, besides the Frankensteins and Elizabeth, Clerval and Justine; the Ingolstadt professoriat; the de Laceys and the exotic Safie — suggestive as each is as a type at times, and often, too, as a name.

An allegorical reading, in short, can take us only so far and no further. Like *Caleb Williams*, her father's imaginative meditation on 'things as they were' in the 1790s, *Frankenstein* is a mixture of expressive modes, and the issue of its genre or genres has arguably had proportionately less critical attention than it deserves.⁷⁴ A Gothic novel acutely sensitive to social and political issues and doubling as myth and moral allegory, *Frankenstein* is also a novel of ideas or 'philosophical novel' in an eighteenth-century mode. There are times when its participation in contemporary intellectual debate is direct — awkwardly so if we think of those long episodes in which the Monster regales Victor Frankenstein with his opinions on matters of language, learning, deformity, and parental responsibility. Oblivious to context and psychology, and only minimally dramatic, the novel is content at such times simply to direct the reader to the issues under debate.

Arguably, then, there is simply too much going on for the novel *not* to divide its critics according to their discrete interests and methods. Indeed, we might want to go on from here to ask how far the profusion of critical interpretations to which it has given rise testifies to a complex suggestiveness, and how far to formal defect and intellectual irresolution. For Marie Roberts, for example, 'Shelleyan aesthetics, Wollstonecraftian feminism and Godwinian radicalism' combine to produce 'a daughter of the Enlightenment as ideologically hybrid and disparate as the very creature pieced together by Victor Frankenstein'; an 'amalgam of conflicting elements destined to propagate both the unexpected and the

incongruous'.⁷⁵ In an unguarded moment, even Fred Botting has suggested that the novel ends 'with a confusion of opposites that both attract and repel' and 'cannot resolve the many narrative subject positions that conflict with each other as they contend for sympathy'.⁷⁶ So Edith Birkhead finds that 'the involved, complex plot of the novel seemed to pass beyond Mrs. Shelley's control': 'she seems to be overwhelmed by the wealth of her resources'.⁷⁷

Beyond Mrs Shelley's control, note. Birkhead's analogy between the novel and the Monster is as old as the introduction to the 1831 edition. 'And now, once again', wrote Mary Shelley, 'I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper' (p. 197). With almost all critics reflecting on the analogy, some have identified the novel's 'hideous progeny' quite specifically as the uninhibited explosion of interpretative activity that it has unleashed. There is in this identification a salutary irony with which I will conclude. Mary Shelley may have bid her hideous progeny go forth; Victor Frankenstein, however, did not. While the novel's first movement is indeed driven by issues of reproduction, its second movement is driven rather by Victor Frankenstein's *resistance* to reproduction: resistance, literally, to monstrous progeny (again, the Reverend Thomas Malthus hovers). Beyond a dramatic *anagnorisis* involving Victor's recognition of the Monster as his own creation and his own responsibility, in other words, the novel's climax and close are precipitated by his determination that his experiment in giving life (hardly eugenics) should end there and then, with the one malformed generation. A dream of immaculate conception 'terminates' in an abortion and the arguably cruel imposition of a law of contraception upon the Monster. Frankenstein's denying *himself* the power and selfish pleasure of the act of generation is of an altogether different moral order from his denying the Monster the comforts of companionship and propagation. It is not an easy decision. 'The monster's uncreating mate is the book's determining absence', writes Gillian Beer. 'Frankenstein denies to his monster entry into the natural order through mating and generation'.⁷⁸ The result is a trail of dead bodies, as the innocent are sacrificed to Victor Frankenstein's belated but ultimately successful attempts to trammel up the consequence.

What this birth control reflects is an anomaly at the very heart of the Frankenstein myth, and thus at the heart of our interpretative procedures. For if, in spite of criticism's persistent recourse to the myth to justify its own use of the text itself, there is no sanction in the story for the

exponential and indefinite growth of critical and cultural metamorphoses, neither is there sanction for any other form of indefinite growth. Both popularly, idiomatically — when, for example, the epithet ‘Frankenstein’ serves for the Monster — and in the sophisticated post-structuralist readings that we sampled in which ‘monstrosity’ is seen as a challenge to category and even conceptualization, the Monster is used to suggest something out of control: ‘The creature turns against him and runs amok’.⁷⁹ But *does* he — run amok, that is? Surely the Monster’s campaign of deracination remains very much a family affair. Justine and the murdered Clerval, after all, were of the Frankensteins’ ‘domestic circle’ (p. 22), and with his adopted family the de Laceys the Monster is content to sate his ‘rage of anger’ with arson (p. 113). Certainly compared, say, with the monster of modern crime fiction, the serial killer, Frankenstein’s Monster’s resentment and revenge, while disproportionately violent and manifestly self-gratifying, seem curiously discriminating and, under the spell of his rhetoric, almost understandable. The reader is torn between sympathy on the one hand and fear and disgust on the other.

That it should remain a family affair is the burden of Victor Frankenstein’s pivotal decision to abort the Monster’s female counterpart and of his determination, later, to pursue and destroy the Monster himself. And though we are not witness to the Monster’s destruction, there is no justification for doubting it. At the end of the novel an experiment which had threatened to explode for various, unanticipated reasons — as well as because of Victor Frankenstein’s arrogance and neglect, of course — actually implodes. Instead of seeking in the myth of Frankenstein’s Monster a curious sanction for its own indiscriminate proliferation, therefore, criticism of Mary Shelley’s novel might ask itself whether Victor Frankenstein’s difficult and necessarily unsatisfactory decision to abort might not have a sad wisdom to offer.

NOTES

¹ Marilyn Butler, ‘*Frankenstein* and Radical Science’, in Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, Norton Critical Edition, ed. J. Paul Hunter (New York and London: Norton, 1996), pp. 302–313 (p. 302). A version of this essay appears as the introduction to Butler’s edition of Mary Shelley,

Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus: The 1818 Text, World's Classics (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. ix-ixi, the text from which I quote on occasion throughout. Though based on the first, 1818 edition, Butler's text includes as its appendices Mary Shelley's Introduction to the quite extensively revised Standard Authors edition of her novel that came out in 1831 as well as all the 1831 variants. There is another World's Classics (Oxford University Press) edition of *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, edited by M. K. Joseph in 1969, and this one is based on the longer, 1831 version of the text. The Penguin edition, edited by Maurice Hindle in 1985, opts for the 1831 version, the Everyman, edited by Paddy Lyons in 1992, for the 1818 (both record variations at the end). The only other handy edition I will mention is of the 1818 text and is edited by Betty T. Bennett and Charles E. Robinson and included in their volume *The Mary Shelley Reader* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1990) along with her novella *Mathilda* and selected 'Tales and Stories', 'Essays and Reviews', and 'Letters'.

² [Thomas James Mathias], *The Pursuits of Literature* [1794-7] (London, 1805), p. 422.

³ Paul O'Flinn cites a number of examples, ranging from Mrs Gaskell's *Mary Barton* to newspaper articles from the 1970s, all of which indicate 'a level in ideology at which the text itself has ceased to exist but a myth or metaphor torn and twisted from it is being strenuously put to work'; see his 'Production and Reproduction: The Case of *Frankenstein*', in *Frankenstein: New Casebooks*, ed. Fred Botting (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 21-47 (p. 31).

⁴ A conspectus of Frankenstein's popular metamorphoses can be found in Donald F. Glut, *The Frankenstein Legend: A Tribute to Mary Shelley and Boris Karloff* (Metuchen N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1973); Martin Tropp, *Mary Shelley's Monster: The Story of Frankenstein* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), pp. 84 ff.; Albert J. Lavelly, 'The Stage and Film Children of *Frankenstein*: A Survey', in *The Endurance of Frankenstein: Essays on Mary Shelley's Novel*, ed. George Levine and U. C. Knoepfelmacher (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 243-89.

⁵ Sandra A. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 221-2.

⁶ Harold Bloom, 'Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus', in his *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in the Romantic Tradition* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 119-129 (p. 122).

⁷ Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* [1933], trans. Angus Davidson, second edition (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1951; 1970), p. 116.

⁸ Robert Kiely, *The Romantic Novel in England* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 161.

⁹ D. W. Harding, 'The Character of Literature from Blake to Byron', in *From Blake to Byron*, Pelican Guide to English Literature, Vol. 5 [1957], ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), pp. 33-64 (p. 45).

¹⁰ Marilyn Butler, 'Frankenstein and Radical Science', *Frankenstein*, Norton Critical Edition, p. 302.

¹¹ Jerrold E. Hogle, 'Frankenstein as Neo-Gothic: From the Ghost of the Counterfeit to the Monster of Abjection', in *Romanticism, History, and the Possibilities of Genre: Re-forming Literature 1789-1837*, ed. Tilottama Rajan and Julia M. Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 177-210 (p. 192).

¹² See the entry on 'Promise and Peril' at the Frankenstein website compiled by the US National Library of Medicine for its exhibition of October 1997- August 1998, <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/>

¹³ Tropp, *Mary Shelley's Monster*, pp. 2-3; 9.

¹⁴ Samuel Holmes Vasbinder, *Scientific Attitudes in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984); Anne Mellor's

discussion comprises chapter 5 of her *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (London: Methuen, 1988), pp. 89-114 (p. 107).

¹⁵ Butler, in the introduction to her edition of *Frankenstein*, World's Classics, 1993, p. xvi.

¹⁶ Ludmilla Jordonova, 'Melancholy Reflection: Constructing an Identity for Unveilers of Nature', in *Frankenstein, Creation, and Monstrosity*, ed. Stephen Bann (London: Reaktion, 1994), pp. 60-76 (p. 66).

¹⁷ Jordonova, 'Melancholy Reflection', *Frankenstein, Creation, and Monstrosity*, p. 67; 73 ff.

¹⁸ 'Frankenstein and Radical Science', in *Frankenstein*, Norton Critical Edition, pp. 302-313 *passim*.

¹⁹ Tim Marshall, *Murdering to Dissect: Grave-Robbing, Frankenstein, and the Anatomy Literature* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995).

²⁰ *Frankenstein*, World's Classics, ed. Butler, p. 195 (my italics).

²¹ See, e.g., Lee Sterrenberg, 'Mary Shelley's Monster: Politics and Psyche in *Frankenstein*', in *The Endurance of Frankenstein*, pp. 143-171 (pp. 166 ff.) and Chris Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), *passim*.

²² William St Clair, *The Godwins and the Shelleys: The Biography of a Family* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 437.

²³ *Shelley: Prose or the Trumpet of a Prophecy*, ed. David Lee Clark (London: Fourth Estate, 1988), pp. 306-7.

²⁴ Fred Botting, 'Frankenstein and the Language of Monstrosity', *Reviewing Romanticism*, ed. Philip W. Martin and Robin Jarvis (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 51.

- ²⁵ Sterrenberg, 'Mary Shelley's Monster', *The Endurance of Frankenstein*, p. 156.
- ²⁶ Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow*, chapter 2, 'The Politics of Monstrosity', pp. 10-29.
- ²⁷ Marie Roberts, 'Mary Shelley: Immortality, Gender and the Rosy Cross', in *Reviewing Romanticism*, pp. 60-8 (p. 62).
- ²⁸ O'Flinn, 'Production and Reproduction', *Frankenstein: New Casebooks*, p. 24.
- ²⁹ Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, p. 89.
- ³⁰ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 242.
- ³¹ Pamela Clemit, 'Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley' in *Literature of the Romantic Period: A Bibliographical Guide*, ed. Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), pp. 284-97 (p. 289).
- ³² Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 235.
- ³³ Cp. Meena Alexander, *Women in Romanticism* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1989): 'Forced right from its inception into a posture of marginality . . . the creature bit by bit is forced to discover itself as a monster: its being for itself determined by the gaze of others. /And so begins one of the most painful of Romantic educations, one that only a woman, a slave or a colonised subject could imagine' (p. 129).
- ³⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 232.
- ³⁵ Ellen Moers, 'Female Gothic', in *The Endurance of Frankenstein*, pp. 77-87 (pp. 79; 81).
- ³⁶ Kiely, *The Romantic Novel in England*, p. 164.

- ³⁷ Margaret Homans, 'Bearing Demons: Frankenstein's Circumvention of the Maternal', in Duncan Wu (ed.), *Romanticism: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 379-400 (pp. 380; 382).
- ³⁸ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, pp. 221 and 230; 222-3.
- ³⁹ U. C. Knoepfelmacher, 'Thoughts on the Aggression of Daughters' in his and Levine's *The Endurance of Frankenstein*, pp. 88-119 (p. 105).
- ⁴⁰ Stephen Behrendt, 'Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, and the Woman Writer's Fate', in *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Theresa M. Kelley (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1995), pp. 69-87 (p. 69).
- ⁴¹ Kate Ellis, 'Monsters in the Garden: Mary Shelley and the Bourgeois Family', in *The Endurance of Frankenstein*, pp. 123-42 (pp. 131-2).
- ⁴² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism', *Frankenstein: New Casebooks*, p. 248.
- ⁴³ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, pp. 243; 221.
- ⁴⁴ Mary Poovey, "'My Hideous Progeny': The Lady and the Monster", in her *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1984), pp. 114-142 (p. 123).
- ⁴⁵ Christopher Small, *Ariel Like a Harpy: Shelley, Mary and Frankenstein* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1972), pp. 101 & ff.
- ⁴⁶ Homans, 'Bearing Demons', *Romanticism: A Critical Reader*, pp. 385-6.
- ⁴⁷ Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, p. 73.

-
- ⁴⁸ Paul A. Cantor, *Creature and Creator: Myth-Making in English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 109.
- ⁴⁹ David Musselwhite, *Partings Welded Together: Politics and Desire in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 49.
- ⁵⁰ Joseph Kestner, 'Narcissism as Symptom and Structure: The Case of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*', in *Frankenstein: New Casebooks*, pp. 68-80 (p. 76-77).
- ⁵¹ Mary Jacobus, 'Is There a Woman in This Text?', *New Literary History*, XIV (1982-3), pp. 117-141 (p. 131).
- ⁵² Homans, 'Bearing Demons', *Romanticism: A Critical Reader*, p. 379.
- ⁵³ Peter Brooks, 'What Is a Monster? (According to *Frankenstein*)', *Frankenstein: New Casebooks*, pp. 81-106 (p. 92).
- ⁵⁴ Marc A. Rubenstein, '“My Accursèd Origin”: The Search for the Mother in *Frankenstein*', *Studies in Romanticism* XV (1976), pp. 165-194 (pp. 174-5; 177).
- ⁵⁵ Knoepfelmacher, 'Thoughts on the Aggression of Daughters', *The Endurance of Frankenstein*, pp. 105; 103 and passim.
- ⁵⁶ Kestner, 'Narcissism as Symptom and Structure', *Frankenstein: New Casebooks*, p. 72.
- ⁵⁷ Tropp, *Mary Shelley's Monster*, p. 37. 'Double Vision', the third chapter of Tropp's *Mary Shelley's Monster* (pp. 34-51), offers a brief compendium of psychoanalytic thinking on the issue.
- ⁵⁸ George Levine, 'The Ambiguous Heritage of *Frankenstein*', in his and Knoepfelmacher's *The Endurance of Frankenstein*, pp. 3-30 (p. 14).

- ⁵⁹ Cantor, *Creature and Creator*, p. 117.
- ⁶⁰ Hogle, 'Frankenstein as Neo-Gothic', *Romanticism, History, and the Possibilities of Genre*, pp. 186-7; 195.
- ⁶¹ Beth Newman, 'Narratives of Seduction and the Seduction of Narrative: The Frame Structure of *Frankenstein*', *Frankenstein: New Casebooks*, pp. 166-90 (pp. 171-2; 168).
- ⁶² Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 233.
- ⁶³ Botting, 'Frankenstein and the Language of Monstrosity', *Reviewing Romanticism*, pp. 53-4. Cp. Musselwhite, *Partings Welded Together*, pp. 58-9; 65.
- ⁶⁴ Botting, 'Frankenstein and the Language of Monstrosity', *Reviewing Romanticism*, pp. 55; 56.
- ⁶⁵ Brooks, 'What Is a Monster?', *Frankenstein: New Casebooks*, pp. 91; 96.
- ⁶⁶ Brooks, 'What Is a Monster?', *Frankenstein: New Casebooks*, p. 100.
- ⁶⁷ Barbara Claire Freeman, 'Frankenstein with Kant: A Theory of Monstrosity or the Monstrosity of Theory', in *Frankenstein: New Casebooks*, pp. 191-205 (pp. 200-1).
- ⁶⁸ The phrase is Chris Baldick's, *In Frankenstein's Shadow*, p. 56.
- ⁶⁹ Paul Sherwin, 'Frankenstein: Creation as Catastrophe', in *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein: Modern Critical Interpretations*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York, New Haven, Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1987), pp. 27-54 (p. 40).
- ⁷⁰ Fred Botting, in the introduction to his edition *Frankenstein: New Casebooks*, p. 1.

-
- ⁷¹ Barbara Johnson, 'My Monster/My Self', in her *A World of Difference* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 144-54 (p. 146).
- ⁷² Umberto Eco *et al.*, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stephan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 48.
- ⁷³ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 229.
- ⁷⁴ Pamela Clemit's study of *Frankenstein* in the context precisely of 'the Godwinian novel' explores a formal, *literary* relationship that many take for granted but leave untouched; see her *The Godwinian Novel: The Rational Fictions of Godwin, Brockden Brown, Mary Shelley* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).
- ⁷⁵ Roberts, 'Mary Shelley: Immortality, Gender and the Rosy Cross', *Reviewing Romanticism*, p. 60.
- ⁷⁶ Botting, 'Frankenstein and the Language of Monstrosity', *Reviewing Romanticism*, pp. 55.
- ⁷⁷ Edith Birkhead, *The Tale of Terror: A Study of the Gothic Romance* [1921] (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), p. 165.
- ⁷⁸ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 110.
- ⁷⁹ The second of two sentences — the first is 'Frankenstein makes a living creature out of bits of corpses' — used by Chris Baldick to sum up the mythic 'action' of *Frankenstein*, *In Frankenstein's Shadow*, p. 3.

WILLIAM CHRISTIE is a senior lecturer in the English Department at the University of Sydney and the author of numerous scholarly articles, mostly on the literature of the Romantic period.