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Frankenstein: *Myths of Scientific
and Medical Knowledge and Stories
of Human Relations*

FRANKENSTEIN (*Frankenstein*) is back in the news. It is probably nearer the mark to say that he (it) is nowadays seldom out of it; hardly a week passes without some item in the press either mentioning the name(s) or referring to the theme. Dolly the sheep set off a barrage of allusions, as did of course the subsequent promiscuous discussions of prospects for the cloning of human beings. Transgenic mice and other newly minted creatures engineered for the purposes of both research and profit bring forth routine acknowledgments, while what has become the humdrum undertaking of organ transplantation wakens into the shock of recognition only when an unprecedented development occurs: the recent first-time success of the grafting of a donor's hand onto the arm of an amputee, for example. The headline in one Vienna daily ran, "Operation wie bei Frankenstein."

Literary criticism and scholarship have been unintermitting in their attentions. The bibliography waxes annually in Malthusian proportions. Most commentary to be sure is of trivial interest, but such a substantial study as Roger Shattuck's *Forbidden Knowledge* foregrounds *Frankenstein* as a central, minatory document. Indeed, Mary Shelley's novel is really the only major work Shattuck adduces that offers an uncompromising representation of his theme; *Paradise Lost* and *Faust* put forward by comparison weak, soft, partial, hesitating, middle-of-the-road (or worse) representations of the grand dispute. Frankenstein has even found a defender of sorts in Stephen Jay Gould, who has argued that Frankenstein's motives as a scientist are unimpeachable (although he fails in his role as creator or parent)—a reading, I am afraid, that the text will not support. For reasons I will touch upon later, *Frankenstein* has become

in late years a much-taught text in a variety of college and university settings (not all of them courses in literature), and new editions for students and instructors roll off the presses regularly. One of the latest, a Norton Critical Edition, regards the novel as nothing less than the "mastertext" for the first part of the nineteenth century, if not for all of it—an inflationary estimate that will be of interest to readers of William Wordsworth and Jane Austen, among others. Nevertheless, its standing as a canonical text, a "classic," has been promoted and further enhanced by the publication in two volumes of a facsimile edition of the manuscript of 1816–17, both in draft and fair copy, along with Percy Shelley's comments and revisions of the text and a scholarly apparatus that explains how the novel was developed and reconceived.

Frankenstein prospers on the internet. A number of websites of varying degrees of scholarly merit can be dialed up. The story hands itself over to postmodern tropes. It is retroformed into splinters, pieces, gobbets, shards, and fragments as a natural, prefabricated hypertext on CD-Rom: The idea of assembling or reassembling or knitting together a do-it-yourself version of the narrative is entirely appropriate and apparently irresistible. And *Frankenstein in Cyberspace* is, once you come to think of it, a logical successor to *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man*.

That *Frankenstein* is a salient text for the present age of technolatri becomes more evident all the time. Technolatri and hype are, as usual, going steady. One might begin with President Nixon's description of the flight to and landing on the moon as the greatest week since the Creation. The microchip and the internet come in for such regular comparisons as: the greatest innovation *since* the discovery and use of fire; *since* the Neolithic revolution and the development of agriculture, domesticated animals, and cities; *since* the invention of writing; *since* the Industrial Revolution, etcetera. How we are to regard, understand, or interpret such juxtapositions remains unspoken, but they all illustrate the technological imperative that is a driving spiritual force in contemporary society. Mary Shelley seems to have been exceptionally responsive to reports of new experiments with electricity and in chemistry. The monster, she remarks, is animated out of dead parts by some kind of "galvanism." In her primal fantasy of technological creation, she "saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life." That engine, as the films have never failed to represent, is some super-battery, or generator, or dynamo, creating an electrical storm in the laboratory while thunder and lightning crash and flash outside. And indeed the monster is the body electric, not as sung by Walt Whitman, but as enacted by those who put them-

selves in thrall to the Web—for whom the electronic network figures as the extended body of humanity. The fantasies of domination, of technological omniscience and omnipresence, go along with the servitude that invisibly fetters users to the machine and to the commodity-life of the spirit that it embodies, dramatizes, promotes, and obfuscates.

That *Frankenstein* is an international, not to say global, cultural phenomenon was made even more evident to me when I lectured on it (in English) in the German-speaking world. When I mentioned that Mary Shelley sends her protagonist to the town of Ingolstadt to study at the university there (it had not yet been removed to Munich), and that it is there he creates the monster, I was promptly interviewed by the Ingolstadt newspaper. I learned that the city holds an annual *Frankenstein* festival that features tours of relevant sites, exhibitions at museums, and the production of a contemporary drama. When I spoke in Austria, I speculated that after the monster flees Ingolstadt, he wanders in a general westerly direction, toward Geneva, the birthplace and home of his creator, and where the two eventually meet. The creature stops off somewhere in between—at the cottage of the De Laceys. He conceals himself, and it is there, invisible to the family but peeking and eavesdropping through a chink in the cottage's wall, that he receives his earliest education in human existence, becomes acquainted with speech, hears music, learns to read, and begins to feel and acutely perceive his irremediable solitude. I suggested that since in the text he frequently follows the course of rivers, the cottage that is so central a part of the monster's narrative experience is located in present-day Austria, somewhere fairly close to the river Inn, partway between Ingolstadt and Geneva. An interview with a producer from Austrian television duly followed. Indeed, when I fancifully speculated that the circumstance of the monster's concealing himself from the family, invisible to but capable of hearing and seeing them, might be a precursor of the behavior of a later literary (and equally mythological) monster, Gregor Samsa of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, even this merely decorative flight of association was taken up with a seriousness unexpected by me at the time but that I now find unsurprising.

II.

It is appropriate to speak in such informal, speculative, and freely familiar terms because we are dealing in *Frankenstein* with nothing less than the creation of an authentic modern cultural myth (as well as a

novel). It is one of those remarkable works that for a century and a half was kept alive entirely by itself, and only in the last twenty-five years or so has it entered fully and actively—been deliberately enlisted and impressed—into the academic canon. But from the moment of its publication it has been widely read and extensively translated; it has never gone out of print; it was performed in the first of numerous stage versions within five years of its initial publication; and from almost the inception of motion pictures it has appeared and reappeared with steadily sustained frequency on the screen. In 1910, less than a hundred years after the novel's publication, the Edison Company produced a 975-foot-long film version, of which nothing survives except a single frame of the actor, one Charles Ogle, as the monster. Since then more than 30 renderings and derivatives of, as well as variations upon, the tale have appeared on film, from the famous *Frankenstein* of 1931, with Boris Karloff, followed by *The Bride of Frankenstein* of 1935, with Elsa Lanchester, to the latest redaction a few years ago, with Robert De Niro as the monster, and including among much kitsch and nonsense Mel Brooks's slapstick classic *Young Frankenstein* as well as an X-rated gruesome concoction called *Andy Warhol's Frankenstein*. Along the way there have also been such mutations as *Frankenhooker* (a title I take to be self-explanatory), and *Frankenweenie*, which features a pet dog. German film culture manifested an early fascination with the theme of manmade life: The Jewish legend of the golem was produced as a German silent film in 1914, two years before Gustav Meyrink's famous novel was published. And in 1916 there came out in Germany a six-part serial entitled *Homunculus der Führer*, about a chemically created "man without a soul" who both makes himself into a national dictator and starts a world war.

There is no end to these variations, Michael Crichton's extremely popular novel and Steven Spielberg's film *Jurassic Park* figuring only among the more up-to-date incarnations of the mixture of thematic elements the myth entails and involves. *Frankenstein* is, then, among many other things, the first important work of science fiction, and writings in this genre have regularly referred back to it. H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, for example, is an interesting post-Darwinian revisionary illustration. More recently there is Brian Aldiss's *Frankenstein Unbound* (also made into a film), which situates the contemporary present of the narrative in California, the lives of Mary and Percy Shelley and Byron and Dr. Polidori at the Villa Diodati in Geneva in 1816, and the fictional characters of Mary Shelley's novel on a single space-time continuum, and then proceeds to mix all three merrily and bewilderingly together.

There is also Robin Cook's techno-thriller of 1989, *Mutation*, whose main character, or antihero, is a reproductive endocrinologist who specializes in *in vitro* fertilization and other new birth technologies such as genetic engineering, and who succeeds in producing a true mutated monster as his own son. So that we will be certain not to miss the point, this scientist-physician-father is named Victor Frank—and here mythology and the contemporary growth-industries of biotechnology come handily and expectably together. Earlier there was Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (made eventually into the film *Blade Runner*), set in the post-nuclear-war future and concerning androids, artificially constructed organic entities (like the original creature, himself an "organic android") who are not supposed to behave like people but who nonetheless, to the surprise of the by now radiationally deformed and degenerating human race that has produced them, are capable of feeling empathy and even love for one another. There is even a children's version, *Frankenstein Moved in on the Fourth Floor*, by Elizabeth Levy, written for readers between the ages of nine and thirteen.

The full title of Mary Shelley's novel is *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. The Prometheus referred to here is not the titan who stole fire from the gods and was punished for his presumption by Zeus; but *Prometheus faber*—or to keep it all in Greek, *Prometheus plasticator*—the mythical figure who created mankind, and who cannot control his own handiwork. It is a sign of this novel's extraordinary force that the name of Frankenstein has for some time now supplanted Prometheus in popular usage, for the fable of Frankenstein embodies a significance for our time that the Prometheus legends no longer do, though they still bore that exceptional charge of implication at the beginning of the modern era: Immanuel Kant, for example, referred to that early experimenter with electricity, Benjamin Franklin, as "the new Prometheus."

Frankenstein is among those few fictional characters who have migrated out of literature and into mythology—into the collective consciousness of our civilization. Don Quixote, Hamlet, Sherlock Holmes,¹

¹ Holmes and Frankenstein's monster were brought together in a circuitous way quite earlier on. In 1892, Arthur Conan Doyle wrote to Dr. Joseph Bell (upon whom Holmes was in large measure originally modeled) that "Holmes is as inhuman as a Babbage's Calculating Machine." In writing this, Conan Doyle was also thinking of another Holmes who was important in his life, the Oliver Wendell Holmes of *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table* (1857-8), who in section one of that work referred to the same calculating machine and then immediately went on: "What a satire, by the way, is that machine on the mere mathematician! A Frankenstein-monster, a thing without brains and without heart, too stupid to make a blunder; that turns out re-

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Dracula, Tarzan of the Apes—and Frankenstein’s “monster.” Numberless people who have never heard of the novel, or of Mary Shelley, or her husband, or her illustrious parents Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, or that the novel was written by a young woman when she was nineteen, are altogether familiar with the image of the creature as it was first embodied by Boris Karloff in the 1930s—as well as the name “Frankenstein,” in which, significantly, the scientist-creator and the monster are fused and confused—and have, moreover, some idea of the ethical resonances of the figuration. As we say nowadays, “We have created a Frankenstein’s monster.” The expression needs no explanation. Two recent examples, one from the popular press and one from the realm of advanced science, drive the point home. A few years ago, Dr. Jack Kevorkian appeared on a television talk-show to discuss whether inmates on death row in American prisons should be allowed to choose to die and donate their organs rather than waiting for years to be executed. The talk-show host remarked, “Some people call you Dr. Frankenstein,” and added that he, Kevorkian, was probably not surprised by this application of the name to him. To which Kevorkian replied, “Well, that’s a compliment. Because those who have read . . . Mary Shelley’s story should realize . . . [that] Frankenstein was a benevolent man. It’s society that made the monster bad.” I cannot conclude, judging from this utterance, that we can number Dr. Kevorkian among those who have read Mary Shelley’s story with much care; but it is worth noting, however, that he too tends in his remarks to conflate the creator and his creation. More recently, it was reported in the journal *Science* that a team of geneticists, led by Dr. Walter Gehring of the University of Basel, have succeeded in isolating the “master control gene” for the formation of the eye, and can even produce individual fruit flies that have as many as fourteen eyes. An American scientific/medical commentator on this report called it “the paper of the year,” and went on to say, “This is Frankensteinian science at its best.” No irony was, as far as I can tell, intended—including the fortuitous (if not providential) return to the Swiss scene of the crime.

To round matters off, there has been a remarkable recent outpouring of feminist readings of the novel and the legend. These regard the laboratory birth of Frankenstein’s monster as the earliest and most powerful critical image of the dangers of the male, patriarchal scientific

sults like a corn-sheller, and never grows any wiser or better.” Although Wendell Holmes has the technology right, he is implicitly conflating, as so many tend to do, Frankenstein with his creature, though it is also true that Conan Doyle would often regard Sherlock Holmes as his own personal Frankenstein-monster.

drive to usurp female procreative power—here and today in the form of the demonism of modern reproductive technology. Margaret Atwood's poem "Speeches for Dr. Frankenstein," for example, imagines the monster as a woman talking back to her creator. Moreover, from a naturalistic perspective, there are feminist readings of the story as a cautionary tale about what happens when a man tries to have, as well as to nurture and raise, a baby without a woman. Here it is ordinary reproduction that is at issue, and Victor Frankenstein is in this context interpreted as an abysmal failure at, as we say today, parenting—indeed he both abandons his child and tries to commit infanticide. Presumably a differently gendered parent would have done better, although there are almost no mothers in the novel. In any event, as with feminist readings, so also with virtually all other contemporary developments in literary theory and criticism—readings of *Frankenstein*, beginning with a battalion of psychoanalytic interpretations at every level and from all schools, continue to emanate from all quarters, from neo-Marxism to deconstruction and the full, irreconcilable dispersion of poststructuralist interpretive conventicles. Such activity of course testifies to the vivid, perdurable strength of the story and to its saliency to our current cultural situation. It is an extraordinary demonstration of tribute. This astonishing novel, written by a young woman still in her teens—who was never again to be touched by genius—is possibly more pertinent today than when it was first written, almost two hundred years ago.

III

The framing action of the novel consists of a series of letters and journal entries written by one Robert Walton, an Englishman who has mounted an expedition to discover an arctic or northwest passage from Europe to the Pacific Ocean. The frame, in other words, is set within the context of imperial expansion in terms of the terrestrial globe, an expression of the will to achieve, discover, conquer, and overcome, "to accomplish some great purpose," as Walton writes, that is both dangerous and transcendent and at the same time likely to be interdicted and tabooed—as Walton's ambitions to excel have been by his father. Hence from the outset the novel is about, among much else, the penetration of both the *outer* and *inner* bodies of Nature—natural geography on the one hand, and the geography of the human body on the other, both of them equally symbolic. And the outer frame of exploration of extreme, unknown, and perilous regions fits around the inner theme of the interior exploration of the body, the hidden recesses or ranges of the mind,

and the unknown mysteries of sexuality and creation, physical and mental, of both babies (or monsters) and of stories or narrative relations. Scientific knowledge of the body of the earth and medical knowledge of the human body nest within one another and make for analogous narratives, as both Walton and Frankenstein are revealed to us as analogous adventurous overreachers.

Frankenstein first appears when he is perceived by Walton pursuing the monster across the arctic wastes of ice, is taken on board Walton's icebound ship, and—emaciated, worn out, and literally dying from his struggle with both the monster and himself—begins to recount his story. Among that narrative's inexhaustible complexities, I want simply to single out a few of this problematical hero's explicitly expressed motives. From boyhood, Frankenstein recalls, he was "deeply smitten with the thirst for knowledge." This "fervent longing to penetrate the secrets of nature" is intensified by his education and his reading of the works of his predecessor natural philosophers, as premodern enquirers and speculators were often called, who "had partially unveiled the face of Nature, but her immortal lineaments were still a wonder and a mystery." In his desire to penetrate more invasively into the secrets of the body of nature, Frankenstein is clearly in pursuit of what was until recently regarded as forbidden knowledge. Moreover, among his earlier ambitions for "glory" was the desire to discover how "to banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death." Along with this drive to transcend mortality, he also entertained the impulse to raise "ghosts or devils"; but these early strivings were temporarily displaced as he became aware of new discoveries in "electricity and galvanism" and new theories in chemistry, with both of which he becomes more closely acquainted when he enrolls in the university at Ingolstadt. The natural supernaturalism of modern science incites him to investigate "the structure of the human frame, and, indeed, of any animal endued with life. Whence, I often asked myself, did the principle of life proceed?" He concludes—not altogether perspicuously—that "to examine the causes of life we must first have recourse to death."² He thereupon

² It is interesting to note that the father of quantum mechanics, Erwin Schrödinger, took the opposite perspective. Writing from exile in 1943, he began his series of lectures *What Is Life?* with a reference to Spinoza: "There is nothing over which a free man ponders less than death; his wisdom is to meditate not on death but on life." It may be interesting to note as well that even in exile Schrödinger emphasized his condition as a free man: he was not a woman, pregnant, unmarried, repudiated by her father, subject to contingencies that Schrödinger, even in Hitler's time, did not have to contend with. It is also of interest that Montaigne, located more closely to Spinoza than Schrödinger, took up the opposing point of view. "To philosophize," he

spends "days and nights in vaults and charnel houses," and after "incredible labour and fatigue, I succeeded in discovering the cause of generation and life; nay, more, I became myself capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter"—and indeed in bringing life back out of death he fulfills one of the deep unconscious wishes that has motivated and continues to motivate physicians. Animated and fortified by this godlike accession of power, he decides to create out of disassembled body parts what he first thinks of as a "human being." Almost at once he apprehends that what he fabricates will not be human, but his rather casual acknowledgment of this does not deter him: "A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs. . . . I thought that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time (although I now find it impossible) renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption."³

At least two differing, if not conflicted, impulses can be made out in this passage, as they can be in Frankenstein's further exposition of his pursuit of forbidden knowledge: "Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay? . . . In a solitary chamber, or rather cell, at the top of the house . . . I kept my workshop of filthy creation. . . . The dissecting room and the slaughter-house furnished many of my materials; and often did my human nature turn with loathing from my occupation." This is indeed demonic science or biology or medical research—call it what you will—as Frankenstein himself concedes, and its tendency is to weaken the ordinary human "affections," though in his instance one can not be certain that they were ever either strong or stable. What is demonic about such activity, among other things, is its imperative and peremptory nature, its unmitigated desire for power and control, and its reckless disregard for human consequences. We perceive this as well in the dream Frankenstein has immediately after the monster is first brought to life—a circumstance so

memorably commented, "is to learn how to die." Medicine as an intellectual discipline, of course, undertakes to include both perspectives in its philosophical self-reflections.

³ As late as 1844, Darwin flirted with speculations about the sudden creation of new humanlike species. "Let us now suppose a Being with penetration sufficient to perceive differences in the outer and innermost organization quite imperceptible to man I can see no conceivable reason why he should not form a new race . . . adapted to new ends." Quoted in Silvan Schweber, "Angels, Demons, and Probability: Some Aspects of British Science in the Nineteenth Century," in A. Shimony and H. Feshbach, eds., *Physics as Natural Philosophy*.

shocking and traumatic as to cause its creator to escape from consciousness. Frankenstein's dream is an incestuous fantasy in which the image of his beloved cousin-sister, to whom he is betrothed, is replaced as he embraces and kisses her by the corpse of his dead mother, whom he now clasps to his bosom. Frankenstein awakes from this awful imagining only to see the monster-baby standing at his bedside, staring at him—that is to say, the incestuous dream is immediately followed by a defused or decomposed element of the primal-scene fantasy with which it was originally connected, or of which it was originally a part. In the unconscious mental "workshop of filthy creation," sexuality, incest, primal-scene material, and the aborted birth of monstrous babies are all conflated, condensed, and annealed.

As for the monster, he is from the moment of his first animation until his disappearance at the novel's end represented, at least in very large part, as a rejected and abandoned child. Yet he is at the same time a species of anti-baby, since he is eight feet tall, and he is, moreover, unique in the sense that he is the first creature of his kind since Adam to have been born without a mother, just as Frankenstein is the first father since God to have had a child without a woman. In addition, the creature has been born fully grown, without formative experiences—that is to say, it is the absence of those relations that are indispensably constitutive and formational for every human being that is most striking about the monster; and his irremediable desire for such relations, and their equally insurmountable exiguousness and improbability for him, are what more than anything else characterizes his miserable, wretched, and doomed existence. In this sense as in others, he is progressively revealed in the course of the narrative to be Frankenstein's double, a disavowed part of himself for which he will not take responsibility. And it is Frankenstein's refusal to take personal responsibility for what he has as a natural or biological scientist created and brought into being that connects him with certain problems of medical science and practice as they exist today.

In some strongly tacit sense, *Frankenstein* is a paradigm of such problems. Because the creature is a being for whom Frankenstein must (as his creator) assume some *responsibility*, but from whom, at the same time, he feels the necessity or has the overriding impulse to withhold whatever ameliorating resources are available, the novel contemplates very early on the model of medical care within a context of scarce resources, or resources that can be, at least arguably, held back, and that range from the provision of elementary human sympathy to the supplying of the creature with a mate to relieve his desolated loneliness.

Nowhere in the novel are these circumstances represented more poignantly than in the monster's unrelieved and unredeemable awareness of his Otherness—his solitude, singularity, difference, isolation, and uncared-for state: his sense of his alterity as monstrous and as monstrosity itself. Illness is of course one of our most common, universal, and inescapable experiences of Otherness—we feel, as we say when we are sickening, that we are not ourselves. The monster perceives this special Otherness from the outset, when he is rejected and repudiated first by his creator, then by every human being that chances to see him, and finally once again by his creator, when Frankenstein refuses to create a mate for him, an Other in a different but altogether inseparable sense of the term. In this perspective, *Frankenstein* is on one of its sides a protracted dramatization of and meditation upon the problems articulated in the momentous section in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* on "Herrschaft und Knechtschaft," the first sentence of which reads: "Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or 'recognized.'"

Otherness, then, has several applicable senses in this multileveled context. It can and does represent the Other as alien, strange, and the object of enmity, fear, and repulsion. It can also represent all other consciousnesses that in their multifariousness make up our evolved and elaborated apprehension of the human world. And it can, of course, represent another self-conscious and commensurate individual, whose recognition of myself as an equal living entity is the only way I can come to be what I am. All three principal male characters in the novel—Walton, Frankenstein, and the monster—pursue this latter purpose, a terminus that can be or become orthogonal to the goal of the aggressive acquisition of knowledge and the domination of nature as a hostile or mutely indifferent Other. Walton from the opening pages says, "I have no friend. . . . I desire the company of a man who could sympathize with me, whose eyes would reply to mine." The monster is himself horribly Other; physically he is both nonhuman and an appalling parody of "the human form divine," yet at the same time he needs another in the sense that sociability, sympathy, and mutuality alone make conscious existence as we know it bearable. And Frankenstein's narrative path is one that begins with Lordship or *Herrschaft* but that ultimately and unavoidably becomes Other in the sense that his kinship or doubleness with the monster increasingly pervades the texture of the tale. Frankenstein begins to concede this development when he, early in the story, after learning of the murder of his younger brother, catches sight of the monster (for

the first time since he fled from his creation in Ingolstadt), immediately intuits or recognizes the creature as the perpetrator of the homicide (really a kind of surrogate fratricide), and calls him "my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave and forced to destroy all that was dear to me"—a complex passage that we cannot pause here to unpack.

What the remainder of the narrative renders for us is Frankenstein's inevitably coming to share the monstrosity of the creature's condition—his solitude, his singularity, his being utterly outcast, his exile from human and communal forms of life. Irresponsible medicine is a mythological playing-out of the fantasy of technological omnipotence, is medicine without the awareness of the Other as a coequal self-consciousness. Such practice turns the scientist-physician and the patient as well, both of them, into isolates and monsters. Out of countless contemporary examples, one familiar illustration of this transformation will have to serve for us. It is a repeatedly rehearsed scene from modern medical practice and takes place most often in a clean, well-lighted intensive-care unit, one of our current "workshops of filthy creation." A patient is attached to a ventilator or respirator and to other machines that sustain and monitor vital processes in him. The physicians who have attended him have realized that his condition is terminal—hopeless—and have fled, leaving the patient alone, isolated and outcast in the midst of the wonderful technology that sustains his now monstrous existence—and the doctors who have run away have impenitently disavowed that existence as a claiming consciousness just as certainly as Frankenstein did when he fled from, spurned, and repudiated his creature. Science, or medicine in its current phase of immense technological progress and progressive domination, hence can produce monsters, and without the guidance of a humane and consciously responsible will can become itself monstrous.⁴

There is deep justice, therefore, in the progressive assimilation in the narrative of Frankenstein to his monster—in his being transformed, as he had made his creature by his own acts, into a figure of abject and undeliverable isolation. And there is, furthermore, both reason and justice in the fusion in the popular imagination of Frankenstein with his monster—one is as likely to hear the monster called Frankenstein by

⁴ For an unsurpassable contemporary representation of what it might be like to have to exist without the certain apprehension that an Other really exists for one's personal consciousness, see Samuel Beckett's great late novella "Company." The difference between Beckett's representation of this catastrophic spiritual circumstance and Mary Shelley's in the monster is that in Beckett the extinction of the Other comes in the intractable course of decrepitude and old age, while for the monster the Other is, not simply extinct, but has never been and can never be there as an experienced and responding entity for him.

those who have not read the book as one is to hear the name applied to the creature's fabricator.

Yet there is more to it even than this. At the end of the novel, Walton's crew revolts; they have had enough of polar exploration and want to return to their homes, their families, their native countries. The dying Frankenstein rebukes them. He recalls them to their original mission, which was to overcome every difficulty, danger, and hardship: "Do not return to your families with the stigma of disgrace marked on your brows. Return as heroes who have fought and conquered and who know not what it is to turn their backs on the foe." The foe here, as always, is both Nature and human limitations and relations—the latter of which Frankenstein has denied in himself. He then goes on, still expiring, obdurately to rehearse once more his career and "past conduct; nor do I find it blameable. . . . I created a rational creature and was bound towards him to assume, as far as was in my power, his happiness and well-being." Yet still he has, for a moment, second thoughts, and with his dying breath can say this to his companion: "Farewell, Walton! Seek happiness in tranquillity 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 myself have been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed." What these last words demonstrate beyond a scintilla of doubt is that he has learned nothing from his experience; his insatiable and incorrigible will to achieve, to know, to overcome, and to dominate cannot be bent or broken—he is in the mainstream tradition of our civilization a true overreaching scientist.

The monster then returns and, standing over the coffin of his dead creator, pleads vainly for forgiveness and pardon for his crimes. He recounts his sufferings, his misery, his abandonment and inconsolable isolation; he calls himself what he, on many levels, truly is, "an abortion." And finally he confesses again to remorse that will not cease until he too expires. In this contrition, the monster, whose abominable being is symbiotic with that of his creator, demonstrates that on one count he is more human than the man who fabricated him—for remorse is one emotion that Frankenstein cannot feel. Following the technological imperative that tends to guide much activity in science and medicine, Frankenstein created his monster. That this imperative can entail monstrous consequences is only one of the many morals that Mary Shelley's classic tale points to and teases us with. Teases us because the story deliberately fails to end definitively; the pursuit of Frankenstein by the monster and then the pursuit of the monster by Frankenstein never really ends. The monster does not permit Frankenstein either to catch him or to lose track of

him; each pursues the other without compunction until both die—or cease, narratively, to exist. The endless pursuit in the action of the novel is analogous to the endless pursuit of new truth by science, and the endless pursuit of meaning in a story and through stories within stories, stories that, like *Frankenstein*, are composed of multiple sutured-together other stories, as the creature himself is a living artifact made up of sewn- or cobbled-together body parts and organs. It is such endless pursuits or quests for meaning that *Frankenstein* dramatizes with perpetually renewed energy and surprise, generating new interpretations and applications as we reread it, and causing us to think about the disaster of human relations that it unforgettably refracts and represents.