Godlike Science/Unhallowed Arts: Language and Monstrosity in *Frankenstein*

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MARY SHELLEY'S *Frankenstein* continues to solicit and disturb us not only through its creation of a decisive image of gothic horror, but also by the pathos of a monsterism in doomed dialectic with nature and with culture. It is above all in the question of language, both as explicit theme of the novel and as implicit model of the novel's complex organization, that the problem of the monstrous is played out. We might approach the network of issues dramatized in the novel first of all through the crucial scene of Victor Frankenstein's first interview with his monstrous creation, the interview which leads to the Monster's telling his tale to Frankenstein, the story-within-a-story (which is a story-within-a-story-within-a-story, when we consider the outer frame of the novel and the role of Robert Walton as initial and ultimate narrator). Following the first murders committed by his Monster—William strangled, Justine judicially done to death through maliciously falsified evidence—Frankenstein journeys to seek solace in the mountains above Chamonix. He penetrates into the "glorious presence-chamber of imperial Nature," climbs to Montanvert and the Mer de Glace, hoping to recapture a remembered effect of "a sublime ecstasy that gave wings to the soul, and allowed it to soar from the obscure world to light and joy."[1] His ascension takes him to a "wonderful and stupendous scene," overlooking the Mer de Glace, facing the "awful majesty" of Mont Blanc; his heart once again opens to joy, and he exclaims, in the tones of the Ossianic bard, "Wandering spirits, if indeed ye wander, and do not rest in your narrow beds, allow me this faint happiness, or take me, as your companion, away from the joys of life" (p. 98). Whereupon a superhuman shape comes bounding over the ice. It is, of course, no spirit of the departed, and no beneficent spirit of nature, but the Monster himself, who has at last tracked down his creator and will force him into parley.

It is worth noting here that every time "nature" is invoked in the novel, as moral presence presiding over human life, it appears to produce only the monstrous. Thus, earlier, as Frankenstein returns to Geneva after learning of William's death, a tremendous thun-

derstorm breaks out over the Lake, a "noble war" in the sky that elevates his soul so that he cries out: "William, dear angel! this is thy funeral, this thy dirge!" (p. 75). No sooner is the apostrophe uttered than Frankenstein perceives in a flash of lightning the figure of the Monster hovering near, and with this apparition comes the moral certainty that here is William's murderer. Other instances concern the fate of Henry Clerval, the poet figure in the Wordsworthian mold, nourished on "the very poetry of nature"; and the creation of the Monster itself. To these we shall return. Already it may be apparent that the call upon nature the Preserver—the moral support and guardian of man—produces instead the Destroyer, the monstrous, what Frankenstein calls "my own vampire" (p. 76).

But I want first to dwell on another issue raised by the Monster's appearance across the Mer de Glace. Frankenstein's initial reaction consists in curses and an abortive attempt to do battle with the Monster. Still the Monster pleads for a hearing. A hearing that need not be a seeing: when Frankenstein commands, "Begone! relieve me from the sight of your detested form," the Monster responds by placing his huge hands over Frankenstein's eyes: "Thus I relieve thee, my creator . . . thus I take from thee a sight which you abhor. Still thou canst listen to me, and grant me thy compassion" (p. 101). The Monster understands that it is not visual relationship that favors him—indeed, his only favorable reception by a human being came, we will discover, from a blind man, de Lacey—but rather the auditory, the interlocutory, the relationship of language.

For the Monster is eloquent. From his first words, he shows himself to be a supreme rhetorician of his own situation, one who controls the antitheses and oxymorons that express the pathos of his existence: "Remember, that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous" (p. 100). When we learn of the Monster's self-education—and particularly his three master texts: *Paradise Lost,* Plutarch's *Lives,* and *Werther*—we will understand the prime sources of his eloquence and of the conception of a just order of things that animates his plea to his creator. But it is of primary importance to register the fact of the Monster's eloquence, of Mary Shelley's radical and saving decision to stage a deformed and hideous and menacing creature who, rather than using grunts and gestures, speaks and reasons with the highest elegance, logic, and persuasiveness. For in the Monster's use of language the novel poses its most important questions.

Frankenstein is touched by the Monster's eloquence. When he looks at this "filthy mass that moved and talked," he feels horror and hatred; yet by the end of the Monster's tale he avows: "His words had a strange effect upon me. I compassionated him" (p. 148). Through the medium of language, a first relationship is created. Like Coleridge's Wedding Guest, Frankenstein is compelled to hear out the tale of this cursed being. The force of the compulsion here is no "glittering eye," but the power of language itself to link speaker and listener. In the narrative situation of the Monster facing and speaking to his creator, we have an instance of what we might call, in the terms of Jacques Lacan, the imaginary versus the symbolic order.[2] The imaginary order is that of the specular, of the mirror stage, and is based on deception, the subject's relation to itself as other; whereas the symbolic order is that of language, the systematic and trans-subjective order of the signifier, the cultural system into which individual subjects are inserted. In any specular relationship the Monster will always be the "filthy mass"; it is only in the symbolic order that he may realize his desire for recognition.

The Monster hence produces a tale, based, like any tale, on the "narrative contract" between narrator and narratee, and founded for its very possibility on an order of cultural symbolism which implies that network of intersubjective relations from which the Monster protests he has been excluded.[3] The close of his narrative suggests the importance of language as relation. In arguing that Frankenstein must create a female monster to be companion to the male, the Monster asserts that only in communication with a similar being can he "become linked to the chain of existence and events, from which I am now excluded" (p. 149). The wish for a *semblable* may itself belong to the imaginary order, as an instance of specular narcissism and deception. The term *chain,* however, identifies meaning as residing in a systematic network of relation, in the symbolic order. It suggests Lacan's exposition of the "signifying chain" of language. Exclusion from this chain could be the very definition of monsterism. The fact of the interlocutionary relationship established by the tale-within-the-tale (within-the-tale) implies the Monster's lack and his desire. Only through those linked signs whose rules he has mastered can the Monster hope to enter "the chain of existence and events," to *signify.*

Language is also the principal theme of the Monster's story of his life up to this point. His first experience with humankind has laid bare the hopelessness of specular relationship, its necessary result in alienation and rejection: the shepherd he discovers in a hut flees shrieking from his sight. Retreating into the hovel adjoining the de Lacey cottage, he then begins his education, seeing but himself unseen.

From his hiding place, he discovers that "these people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds" (p. 112). What particularly impress him are the emotional effects wrought by these sounds, which "sometimes produced pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness, in the minds and countenances of the beholders. This was indeed a godlike science." Mary Shelley's Monster is evidently in many respects an Enlightenment natural man, or noble savage; his first ideas demonstrate the processes of Lockean sensationalism and Hartleyan associationism. His discovery of language implies Rousseau's argument, in the *Essai sur l'origine des langues,* that language springs from passion rather than need: need cannot form the necessary social context for voiced language since its effect is to scatter men; and need can make do with the barest repertory of visual signs, gestures, imperatives. Passion, on the other hand, brings men together, and the relation of desire calls forth voice.[4] It is hence no accident that what language first reveals to the Monster is human love. And it is again no accident that his rhetorical plea to his creator ends with the demand for a creature whom he might love.

The Monster also discovers an important corollary to Rousseau's postulate of the emotional origin of language: the radical figurality of language, its founding statute as misnaming, transference, the displacement of the order of words from the order of things. The sign is not consubstantial with the thing it names: "the words they uttered, not having any apparent connection with visible objects, I was unable to discover any clue by which I could unravel the mystery of their reference" (p. 113). The Monster in this manner uncovers the larger problem of the arbitrariness, or immotivation, of the linguistic sign. And the consequences of this recognition will be consonant with Saussure's: the understanding that the "godlike science" of language depends, not on simple designation, on passage from the signifier to the signified, but rather on the systematic organization of signifiers. From his initial experience of language, the Monster intuitively grasps that it will be of importance to him because by its very nature it implies the "chain of existence and events" within which he seeks a place, defines the interdependency of senders and receivers of messages in that chain, and provides the possibility of emotional effect independent of any designation.

The Monster's initiation in language, then, unerringly discovers language to be on the side of culture rather than nature and to imply the structures of relation at the basis of culture. The discovery is a vital one, for the side of "nature" is irreparably marked by lack, by monsterism. Against the Monster's hearing of the cottagers' language

is set his discovery of his own features in a mirroring pool, a passage which reads as a sinister parody of Eve's discovery of her fair features in the pool of Eden, on the day of her creation, in Book IV of *Paradise Lost.* In *Frankenstein,* the reflected image convinces the beholder "that I was in reality the monster that I am" (p. 114). This specular *cogito,* where the Monster witnesses his outward identity as alien to his inner desire, estranged, determined by the view and judgment of the Other, clinches the importance of language as the symbolic order which must compensate for nature. The Monster understands that he must not show himself to the cottagers until he has mastered their language, "which knowledge might enable me to make them overlook the deformity of my figure" (p. 114).

The thematization of language becomes so rich at this point in the narrative that one is forced to abridge discussion. There is, first of all, a crisscrossing of languages implicit in the text: with the arrival of Safie, we have a lesson in French being offered to a Persian, in the midst of a German-speaking region, the whole rendered for the reader in English. This well-ordered Babel calls attention to the fact and problem of transmission and communication, the motive for language, and reminds us that the framing structure of the novel—Walton's letters to his sister, to which we shall return—evokes the same concerns. The Monster learns language through overhearing the instruction of Safie by Felix and Agatha; he is a kind of secondary pupil, excluded but learning the means by which to be included. Since the Monster needs language in order to compensate for a deficient nature, it is fitting that the first use to which he puts his new science is reading, the written word being for Rousseau precisely the supplementary and mediate state of language, its transmissible (hence also potentially deceitful) form, which does not demand presence for its operation. The three texts which the Monster finds and reads—Plutarch's *Lives,* Goethe's *Werther,* and *Paradise Lost*—cover the public, the private, and the cosmic realms, and three modes of love; they indeed constitute a possible Romantic *cyclopedia universalis*. Without giving this choice of texts the attention it deserves, we should notice that it is the Monster's literalist reading of *Paradise Lost* that poses in acute, emblematic, and literary terms the problem of his nature: he appears to be a unique creation, in the manner of Adam, "united by no link to any other being in existence"; yet by his condition, he more resembles Satan (p. 130). The paradox of his origin and nature will be resolved by another piece of writing: by Frankenstein's lab journal, which substitutes for myths of creation a literal account of the Monster's manufacture, a "disgusting" tale of an "accursed origin," by which the Monster discovers that he has indeed been created

in another's image, but as a "filthy type" (p. 131). The "godlike science" has led him to discovery of his origins in Victor Frankenstein's "unhallowed arts" (p. 89).

Thus far, language, and especially writing, must appear to the Monster, as it did to Rousseau, ambiguous in effect, like the Promethean gift of fire, so strange in its production of "opposite effects" (p. 105). Yet it remains the necessary compensation, the only hope for linkage to humankind. The Monster will try its effects first on the blind de Lacey. And here the godlike power of the science does reveal itself, as de Lacey responds: "I am blind, and cannot judge of your countenance, but there is something in your words which persuades me that you are sincere" (p. 135). Mutual sympathy, benefaction, protection, and relation are on the point of being sealed through language, when Felix, Agatha, and Safie enter to throw the situation brutally back into the specular order: Agatha faints, Safie flees, and Felix violently breaks asunder the interlocutors. The result is Fall. The Monster becomes explicitly Satanic—"I, like the arch-fiend, bore a hell within me" (p. 137)—sets fire to what had late been his happy seat, and sets forth into the world in search of the hidden face of his creator, the *deus absconditus* who alone now can restore, through a second creation, the Monster to that chain of living sympathies. It is during this search that the Monster will commit his first murder, that of William, Victor Frankenstein's brother. This act implicates the question of relation through its displacement of oedipal conflict: the Monster strangles William when the boy protests that his "papa" is M. Frankenstein; he then stands fascinated, erotically medused by the portrait hanging round William's neck, which represents William's and Victor's mother. The result of his baffled desire is the perverse act by which he plants the portrait on Justine Moritz, thus condemning the mother substitute ("not indeed so beautiful as her whose portrait I held; but of an agreeable aspect, and blooming in the loveliness of youth and health"), whose possession is forever denied to him (p. 144).

At its completion, the Monster's narrative implies that use of language has failed to gain his entry into the "chain of existence and events." It has served rather to the knowledge of his unique and accursed origin. In his confrontation with humankind, specular relationship and the imaginary order appear to have reasserted their dominion. Yet, if language has failed to give direct access to the existential object of the Monster's desire, it has nonetheless provided the means for construction of a story within Frankenstein's story which will subvert the entire set of relations of which Frankenstein is part. For if the Monster's use of language has failed to provide access to the

desired signified, it has contextualized desire itself as a systematic chain of signifiers whose rhetorical effect cannot be denied by the narratee. The symbolic order is operational.

In the passage from the Monster's narrative back to Frankenstein's, desire reveals its functioning as metonymy, explicated by Lacan as a perpetual "sliding" of the inaccessible signified under the signifier. Desire (this is no doubt a simplification of Lacan's analysis) is born from an original lack or want, in the discrepancy between need and demand, which is here, in the relationship of Monster to creator (as in the infant-mother relationship), essentially the demand for recognition. In constructing his narrative appeal, the Monster has made language the vehicle of desire, has built a construct of signifiers which figures his initial want and lack without fulfilling it, so that the interlocutionary relationship, language itself as relation, becomes the medium of his truth, which is want of relation. The metonymic sliding passes desire on to his interlocutor, charged now with crossing the "bar" between signifier and signified, finding access to the meaning of desire. Frankenstein is forced to accept the establishment of relation and the contagion of desire: "His tale, and the feelings he now expressed, proved him to be a creature of fine sensations; and did I not as his maker owe him all the portion of happiness that it was in my power to bestow?" (p. 147). This response is the basis for a contract or even covenant: the Monster will desist from acts of vengeance against mankind, while Frankenstein will undertake a secondary creation, a female monster.

The covenant will be violated by the creator himself, when he mutilates the nearly completed form of the monsteress. This violent rupture may serve notice that Frankenstein has come to understand that the Monster's expressed wish is a figure for something else that could endanger the whole dialectics of desire and repression. He has agreed to create the monsteress because, while he is moved by the Monster's narrative, he cannot "sympathize with him" (p. 148). Creation of the monsteress, in other words, would be a *substitute* for inclusion of the Monster within the human chain; and Frankenstein may obscurely recognize that the Monster's desire for his mate may itself be a substitute for his real, his absolute demand, which is for recognition by his creator. To create the monsteress would be to create the possibility of that demand being laid bare, and this in turn would put Frankenstein too fully, blindingly, before the monstrous element in his own nature which led him to create a monstrous being: it would force him to recognize what he wishes to deny. The Monster would be his *symptom* ("my own spirit let loose from the grave," he has said [p. 76]), which in Lacanian terms is metaphor, the figure of access to repressed truth.

Whatever the value of such a speculative interpretation, Frankenstein's decision to break his covenant with the Monster explicitly concerns the "chain of existence and events." It occurs to Frankenstein that the inevitable result of "those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted" will be a race of monstrous progeny which may wreak havoc on mankind (p. 166). Precisely because the special creation demanded by the Monster has as its purpose the inception of an affective chain *outside* humanity—a new family, a new society—it raises the frightening possibility of a new and uncontrollable signifying chain, one with unknown rules and grammar. Milton's Eve after the Fall considers that the divine command to reproduce now means "propagated curse." It is the propagation of his aberrant signifier, through unforseeably monstrous messages, that prompts Frankenstein to destroy what the Monster considers his authentic desired signified and to accept the consequences in terms of his own chain of affections—consequences which are immediately ghastly.

The destruction of the monsteress marks the doom of any hope that the Monster might gain access to a signifying chain in existence. He is condemned to the order of words which does not match the order of things, which hasn't produced the desired referent, but rather brought knowledge of the unappeasable lack or difference that defines his monsterism. The godlike science itself proves deceptive: his eloquence can achieve no more than a state of permanently frustrated desire for meaning; his language is metonymic advance without a terminus. The way in which, from out of his frustration, he seeks vengeance on Frankenstein, exactly mirrors this situation. He does not strike directly at his creator—at the holy name which is the signified of all signifiers—but rather by displacement, by metonymy, at closely related elements in Frankenstein's own chain of existence and events: at his friend Clerval, at Elizabeth the moment she becomes Frankenstein's bride. Frankenstein misunderstands the direction of the Monster's threats, perceiving only menace to himself. The Monster's words, "I will be with you on your wedding night," lead to a fatal blindness as to the threatened object. The reader understands at once that it must be Frankenstein's bride who will be sacrificed to the bride denied to the Monster.

One could pause over Frankenstein's blindness, the convergence of Eros and death on his wedding night, and the apparent fear of erotic union. "Oh! peace, peace, my love," he murmurs to Elizabeth, "this night, and all will be safe: but this night is dreadful, very dreadful" (p. 194). Elizabeth may be the interdicted because incestuous bride: she has been raised as sister to Frankenstein, and has furthermore assumed the nurturing role of Frankenstein's dead mother. The nec-

rophilic embrace which is all that Frankenstein obtains follows the logic of his creative project, which has usurped the power to make life from the dead. It is perhaps most important to recognize that fulfillment with Elizabeth would mark Frankenstein's achievement of a full signified in his life, accession to plenitude of being—which would leave no place in creation for his daemonic projection, the Monster. That projection must act out Frankenstein's sadistic impulses in destruction of the being who would bring rest, and arrest, to Frankenstein's movement of desire, must maintain the lack which led to the Monster's creation in the first place.

Frankenstein and his Monster are in fact by now engaged in an exacerbated dialectic of desire, where each needs the other because the other represents for each the lack or gap within himself. Frankenstein sets out in pursuit of the Monster with the intent of destroying him, but also with a firm intuition that the Monster's death will be his own death—that in destroying the daemonic side of himself, he will also destroy the whole of self. For he, too, is now inhabited by the Satanic—like the Monster, he bears "a Hell within me"—and destruction of the representative of that hell will entail destruction of the ego, now mastered by its sadistic drives. The Monster flees from Frankenstein, yet desiring never to escape completely, intent that Frankenstein maintain his pursuit, for now pursuit alone represents the Monster's last tenuous link to the signifying chain. It is the only form of recognition by his creator that he can exact. Hence the Monster as he flees northward leaves his mark and trace to guide his pursuer, messages carved in trees, even caches of food to sustain the chase. "Come on, my enemy," reads one of the Monster's inscriptions, in a nice balance of hatred and affection (p. 204). The pursuit finally leads toward the very heart of nonmeaning, toward the lifeless pole, the immaculate ice cap.

What we have said about the Monster's efforts to achieve recognition and to enter the signifying chain may pose with new force the question with which we began, the relation of the monstrous on the one hand to nature, on the other to culture. The question of origins has been of utmost importance to the Monster since his first initiation into language. Like Oedipus, he has felt that his very definition depended on the discovery of his generation: "Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come?" (p. 129). When his origin is revealed, it turns out to be not the defining plenitude of parenthood—the two who make one—but rather an undecidable borderline instance, another lack. He appears to be generated at the very frontier between nature and the supernatural, from Frankenstein's studies in physics and chemistry, which are always on the verge of becoming metaphysics

and alchemy. When Frankenstein discovers the principle of animation (the Promethean revelation at the center of the text, which the text never speaks, which it maintains as a central interdiction and dumbness), he must proceed through death in order to create a new life. "Life and death," he recalls, "appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world" (p. 53). Thus he works within the very "citadel of nature" (p. 38), with its first principles, but he is engaged in an overreaching quest which bears the mark of the counter-natural from its inception. He collects "with profane fingers" pieces of the dead, his task is "loathesome," he becomes "insensible to the charms of nature," and the seasons pass unnoticed. The Monster comes into existence as a product of nature—his ingredients are one hundred percent natural—yet by the fact and process of his creation he is unnatural. Yet since he is a unique creation, without precedence or replication, he has no cultural context either. He remains, so to speak, postnatural and precultural.

Despite the ambiguities and profanity of Frankenstein's act of creation, the Monster comes into existence potentially good, an Enlightenment savage with essentially benevolent instincts. The story of his education is a classic study of right natural instinct perverted and turned evil by the social milieu, a counterexample to such pedagogical utopias as Rousseau's *Emile*. He perfectly understands what has happened to him. "I am malicious because I am miserable," he tells Frankenstein (p. 146); and we must believe that the establishment of links between himself and the human community would restore his benevolence. Natural goodness is hence a real but a fragile quality. Rejection and isolation easily turn us back to an original accursedness, to the Satanic *non serviam*: "Evil henceforth be thou my good."

"Nature" in *Frankenstein* appears to be a remarkably fragile moral concept of ambiguous implication. It is as if the Monster, generated within the sanctum of nature, at home in its most sublime settings, might himself represent the final secret of nature, its force of forces. The novel dissents from the optimistic assumption that nature is support and comfort and source of right moral feeling, "The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul / Of all my moral being," as Wordsworth writes in "Tintern Abbey." This dissent is suggested most forcefully through the figure of Henry Clerval, who balances Frankenstein's pursuit of science with study of the poets. He is "a being formed in 'the very poetry of nature' " (the quotation is from Leigh Hunt), a figure in the manner of Wordsworth. Frankenstein quotes Wordsworth in description of Clerval:

> The sounding cataract
> Haunted *him* like a passion: the tall rock,
> The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
> Their colours and their forms, were then to him
> An appetite; a feeling, and a love,
> That had no need of a remoter charm,
> By thought supplied, or any interest
> Unborrow'd from the eye.

The lines from "Tintern Abbey" are usually taken to represent the poet's first, immediate, unreflective relation to nature, now lost to him but apparent in his sister Dorothy, to whom he can say that "Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her." Clerval cleaves to nature in such a childlike love and trust. Yet Clerval will fall victim to the Monster in a scenario that curiously implicates nature. Frankenstein has defied the Monster by destroying the nearly complete monsteress, and has rowed out to cast the *disjecta membra* into the sea. He then loses consciousness, a storm blows up, the sea grows wild, his skiff is blown off course, finally to come to ground on the Irish coast, where he is arrested as a murderer and confronted with Clerval's corpse. Nature does not protect Clerval from the malignant possibilities of nature itself. There are more than sounding cataracts and sublime mountains in nature: there are also one's friends' monsters and the disseminated pieces of monstrous creation.

Nature is not one thing, and those who think it so are caught in a self-destructive blindness. This Frankenstein eventually recognizes, when he cries out to the Genevan magistrate who refuses to credit his tale of the Monster, "Man . . . how ignorant art thou in thy pride of wisdom!" (p. 200). Nature is preserver and destroyer. It possesses the awesome and ambiguous Power evoked in P. B. Shelley's "Mont Blanc," a poem written in the same summer that Mary Shelley composed *Frankenstein* and a work which takes us back to the situation with which we began: Frankenstein on the Mer de Glace, in "the glorious presence-chamber of imperial nature," where he evokes the spirit of the majestic mountain and instead summons forth his created daemon. The daemonic potential of Power in "Mont Blanc" "dwells apart." *Frankenstein* brings it into human existence, as the destructive potential of the creative drive, or Eros, of nature's creature man.

The fact of monsterism suggests that nature in *Frankenstein* has something of the radical amorality so insistently described by Sade. For Sade, nature permits everything and authorizes nothing. Since all tastes and pleasures are in nature, no perversion can outrage and no crime alter nature. For if one searches for an underlying pattern or

principle in nature, what one finds is destruction itself. So that man's destruction—torture, murder—merely does nature's work. The impassibility of nature, the regulatory principle of life which yet refuses to offer any ethical principle, is a source of anguish for Sade; and his compilation of pleasures and crimes *contra naturam* can be read as an ever-frustrated effort to make a human mark on nature, to break nature's bonds, to reach through to some transcendent principle. There are perhaps parallels to be found in Victor Frankenstein's manic quest to push nature to a frontier where it becomes metanature, where it releases its own principle of being. Certainly Frankenstein's assault on and in the citadel of nature produces a monsterism that both reveals and mocks the arcane principle. The overriding fact of nature in the book—dominating Mont Blanc, the Lake of Geneva, the Hebrides, and all the other sublime natural settings—is the fact and possibility of monsterism itself. It is to this, I believe, that the Monster returns in his peroration, as he says farewell to Walton and to the dead Frankenstein: "Blasted as thou wert, my agony was still superior to thine" (p. 221). He goes on to attribute the superior agony to remorse. Yet surely it first of all derives from the condition of monstrosity itself. This is the supreme agony and the properly monstrous blot upon nature: that nature should be capable of producing the monstrous. It is a nature that eludes any optimistic Romanticism, finally most to resemble Freud's "uncanny": the Monster perfectly illustrates the *Unheimliche,* a monstrous potentiality so close to us—so close to home—that we have repressed its possibility and assigned an *un* as the mark of censorship on what is indeed too *heimisch* for comfort.[5]

The ambiguous and paradoxical nature of nature in *Frankenstein*—its seemingly equal potential as essentially good and as self-negatingly evil—cannot be resolved within the orders of the real or the imaginary, but only within the symbolic order, and only in structural terms. That is, the creations of nature will be bad or good only through the play of difference and relation, only in terms of their place in the signifying chain. This is what the Monster has understood by the time he makes his appeal to his creator for a *semblable,* what indeed he has already grasped when he intuits the possibilities of the "godlike science." In the play of sameness and difference that founds the system of our signs for things, then in grammar and syntax, we have the basis of relation and the possibility of exchange of tokens, communication. The Monster's failure—what establishes him irremediably *as* monster—is his inability, despite his eloquence, to find relation.

After the death of his creator, there remains as interlocutor for the Monster only Walton, who has been warned by Frankenstein that the

Monster is "eloquent and persuasive," but not to be listened to. By the time of his confrontation with Walton that closes the book, the Monster states his recognition that his effort to enter into the signifying chain is at an end with the phrase, "the miserable series of my being is wound to its close" (p. 217). This expression, "the series of my being," is used twice in the final scene. The now obsolete sense of series as "sequence," "order," suggests the meaning of "chain" in the word's etymology and well implies the metonymic "sliding" of the Monster's effort to reach satisfaction of desire, the movement ever forward that can reach no point of arrest and no ultimate structuring relationship. It is a textual movement that can never cover over and fill in its central lack, that can reach an end only in extinction.

Yet in a larger context, the "series" does not stop with the Monster's self-immolation. The fact of monstrosity has established its own chain, with its own syntax and significance. What we witness at the end of the book is the contamination of monsterism as a kind of accursed signifier that comes to inhabit the novel's principal actors. We must here reflect on the significance of the outer frame of the novel, that frame which encloses Frankenstein's narrative as his encloses the Monster's. It is notable that Walton's initial letters to his sister strike the very note of the Monster's narrative: Walton has "no friend . . . none to participate my joy . . . to sustain me in dejection" (p. 18). He is reduced to committing his thoughts to paper, "a poor medium for the communication of feeling," when really "I desire the company of a man who could sympathize with me; whose eyes would reply to mine." Deep in the uninhabited polar regions, he will meet his first friend in a man who has had similar visions of Promethean discovery and fame and whose understanding of friendship—since the death of Clerval—articulates Walton's own feelings: "I agree with you . . . we are unfashioned creatures, but half made up, if one wiser, better, dearer than ourselves—such a friend ought to be—do not lend his aid to perfectionate our weak and faulty natures" (p. 27). Friendship is thus defined as specularity and as complementarity, the longing of two incomplete creatures for fullness in androgynous fusion. But this dream is no more to be realized than the Monster's hope of union. Walton loses Frankenstein to death. And he loses his dream of Promethean discovery, as his mutinous sailors vote to turn southward. His hopes are "blasted"—the term which has been applied to Frankenstein's aspirations, and which the Monster will at the last apply to himself.

All aspirations, then, lie blasted and wasted at the end, as if the original act of overreaching, of sacrilegious creation, had tainted the world with monsterism. Each tale interlocked within tale touches its

listener with the taint of monsterism: Frankenstein receives it from the Monster's tale—his life, contracted to the Monster's desire, becomes torment thereafter—and Walton receives it from Frankenstein's. Walton remains, like the Ancient Mariner so often evoked in the novel—or, perhaps more accurately, like the Wedding Guest—the bearer of a tale of unnatural wisdom, the bearer of the taint of monsterism. The fate of this monsterism can only be described as textual. The ostensible recipient of Walton's letters (and hence of the interpolated manuscript of Frankenstein, itself containing the Monster's narrative) is Mrs. Saville, Walton's sister. (Is there, once again, a suggestion of incest in the choice of the object of affection?) It is to her that all messages will presumably arrive. But she has no more existence, in the novel, than a postal address. She is inscribed within the novel as a kind of lack of being, which means that what we are left with is a text, a narrative tissue that never wholly conceals its lack of ultimate reference and its interminable projection forward to no destination.

The absent Mrs. Saville, faceless addressee of all the textual material that constitutes *Frankenstein,* is exemplary of the situation of language and desire as they have been dramatized in the novel. If the Monster's story demonstrates that the godlike science of language is a supplement to a deficient nature, an attempt to overcome a central gap or lack of being, the inner and outer frames—Frankenstein's narrative and Walton's letters—indicate that language never can overcome the gap, that the chain established has no privileged limits, no mode of reference, but signifies purely as a chain, a system or series in which everything is mutually interrelated and interdependent but without any transcendent signified. There is no transcendent signified because the fact of monsterism is never either justified or overcome, but simply passed along the chain, finally to come to inhabit the reader himself who, as animator of the text, is left with the contamination of monsterism. Desire—Walton's, Frankenstein's, the Monster's—cannot overcome the monstrous, but only reproduce it. Monsterism comes rather to be contextualized; the text remains as indelible record of the monstrous, emblem of language's ultimate lack of transcendent reference.

In his essay on the *Unheimliche,* Freud speculates on the special capacity of literature to evoke and to control the feeling of the uncanny. Literature appears to be a kind of controlled play with the daemonic, with the monstrous repressed. It may belong to the logic of literature that Mary Shelley's daemon should understand that his place lies within the symbolic order of language. What was not foreseeable was that, inhabiting the order of language, the daemon

should fail of ever arriving at meaning, and become rather the very image of a desire that can never fix or pin down meaning, but merely pass on the desire and the curse of meaning. Yet here we find the logic of desire in literature, desire of the text and for the text. The text solicits us through the promise of a transcendent signified, and leaves us, on the threshold of pleasure, to be content with the play of its signifiers.[6] At the same time, it contaminates us with a residue of meaning that cannot be explained, rationalized, but is passed on as affect, as taint.

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NOTES

1 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* (New York: Dell, 1971), pp. 96–97. Subsequent references will be given between parentheses in the text and are to this edition, which reprints the text of 1831. I have also consulted the valuable critical edition prepared by James Rieger (Indianapolis and New York, 1974), which gives the text of 1818 (with the corrections of 1823) and notes the variants occurring in the text of 1831.

2 I adapt these terms from Lacan without giving them their full context in his thought and without full exposition of their import. On the Lacanian concepts so used in this essay, see especially Jacques Lacan, "Le Stade du miroir" and "L'instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient ou la raison depuis Freud," in *Ecrits* (Paris, 1966).

3 On the "narrative contract," see Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris, 1970); in English, *S/Z* (New York, 1974). The term *narratee* is adapted from Gérard Genette's *narrataire*; see "Le Discours du récit," in *Figures III* (Paris, 1972).

4 See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (Paris, 1970).

5 See Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (*Das Unheimliche*), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* ed. James Strachey et al. (London 1953–74), vol. XVII.

6 See Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris, 1973); in English, *The Pleasure of the Text,* tr. Richard Miller (New York, 1975).