Mary Shelley's
Frankenstein and
Milton's Monstrous Myth

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*A*T the close of *Frankenstein,* the monster locates a significant event in his history in a moment of self-identification laden with Miltonic overtones: "Evil thenceforth became my good. Urged thus far, I had no choice but to adapt my nature to an element which I had willingly chosen."[1] It would be a mistake, however, to read Mary Shelley's novel as a nineteenth-century reenactment of the fall of Milton's Satan, despite her conscious use of such Miltonic parallels. For the only real sense in which the monster's history can be read as a fall, fortunate or unfortunate, is in his "fall" into culture and language, especially into the limited and limiting ontology of Milton's *Paradise Lost.* The monster's error has not been in his rebellion against the father, but in his mistaken assumption that his "nature" was a thing that he could "willingly" choose. As *Frankenstein* makes quite clear, the monster's identity has been shaped by a cultural myth in which the fallen can be *only* Adam or Lucifer. He finds the answer to his agonizing question "What was I?" in the pages of *Paradise Lost,* and in so doing recapitulates the hegemonic, that system of meanings and values encoded in Milton's epic,

303

304 NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE

which shapes his perception of his self and comes to constitute his only sense of reality.[2]

Frankenstein should be read then as an attack upon the monologic and monolithic voice of Paradise Lost.[3] As Mary Shelley's husband noted in the "Preface" to his Prometheus Unbound, the character of Satan (and we might add Paradise Lost itself) "engenders in the mind a pernicious casuistry," and that "in the minds of those who consider that magnificent fiction with a religious feeling, it engenders something worse" (emphasis added).[4] As Ellen Moers has suggested, Frankenstein is a "birth myth,"[5] but it is about the cultural engendering of a pernicious and powerful ideology of identity or "something worse." If the novel is in some sense an answer to

[2]See Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 108–14.

[3]Contemporary study of Frankenstein that treats, at least in part, the relationship between Mary Shelley's novel and Milton's Paradise Lost begins with Harold Bloom's "Frankenstein, or the New Prometheus," Partisan Review, 32 (1965), 611–18, and can be divided into two groups. In the first group, critics like Bloom see Shelley's novel essentially as a Romantic version of Paradise Lost, in which Milton's epic serves ironically as a gloss upon the action of the novel and the identity of the characters. See, for example, Burton R. Pollin, "Philosophical and Literary Sources of Frankenstein," Comparative Literature, 17 (1965), 97–108; Milton A. Mays, "Frankenstein: Mary Shelley's Black Theodicy," Southern Humanities Review, 3 (1969), 146–53; Joseph H. Gardner, "Mary Shelley's Divine Tragedy," Essays in Literature, 4 (1977), 182–97; and Leslie Tannenbaum, "From Filthy Type to Truth: Miltonic Myth in Frankenstein," Keats-Shelley Journal, 26 (1977), 101–13. More recently, however, critics have begun to see Frankenstein not simply as a Romantic reworking of Paradise Lost but as a critique and/or subversion of Milton's epic and its inherent ideology. See, particularly, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 213–47; Peter McInerney, "Frankenstein and the Godlike Science of Letters," Genre, 13 (1980), 455–76; Paul Sherwin, "Frankenstein: Creation as Catastrophe," PMLA, 96 (1981), 883–903; Mary Jacobus, "Is There a Woman in This Text?," New Literary History, 14 (1982), 117–42; Joyce Carol Oates, "Frankenstein's Fallen Angel," Critical Inquiry, 10 (1984), 543–54; Margaret Homans, Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 100–119; and Chris Baldick, In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 30–62. This essay takes part in this recent trend of reading Shelley's novels as a critique of Milton's epic and differs primarily in that it argues that the focus of her critique is the ideology of identity and parameters of being encoded in Paradise Lost.

[4]"Preface" to Prometheus Unbound, in Shelley's Poetry and Prose, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 133.

[5]Literary Women (New York: Doubleday, 1976), p. 92.

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the question Mary Shelley claimed in the 1838 "Introduc-
tion" was often posed by her readers—how she had come to
"think of, and to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea" (p.
5)—then we are invited to see that "hideous idea" repre-
sented not by the monster or in his creation by Victor Fran-
kenstein, but in a monstrous myth of identity that leads not
only to violence, but also to the destruction of any other
emergent voices a culture might foster. The larger philosophi-
cal issue central to *Frankenstein,* as Anne K. Mellor notes, is
"what, finally, is being," and how is it constituted?; and Mary
Shelley's answer to that question is that being is a verbal
construct, the product of a cultural naming or misnaming
whose pervasiveness and power, perhaps, is unavoidable.[6]

As a literary text contributing to the production of cul-
tural identity, *Paradise Lost* stands alone in the eighteenth and
nineteenth centuries atop the literary hierarchy, and Milton's
epic is clearly rooted in the history of Puritanism and in the
bourgeois ideal of the individual, the "concept of the person
as a relatively autonomous self-contained and distinctive uni-
verse."[7] Individuality, Milton claims, means being "By nature
free, not over-rul'd by Fate / Inextricable, or strict neces-
sity;"[8] and in *Paradise Lost* he presents two possible figures of
individualism: Lucifer and Adam. But as Frederick Garber
suggests, it is ultimately in the character of Satan that "Milton
isolated and identified what came to be seen as a predomi-
nant form of autonomous selfhood."[9] For later generations

[6]Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York:
Routledge, 1989), p. 136. Like Mellor, who does not deal specifically with *Paradise
Lost,* I believe that Mary Shelley sees the monster's identity as "an *arbitrary* semantic
construction" imposed upon him and that severely limits the possible answers to his
ontological crisis (p. 128). But, whereas Mellor maintains that identity in the novel is
a process of seeing, I feel that it is more of a process of "reading," in which *Paradise
Lost* and the ontological choices it provides serves as a restrictive cultural repository
of the lineaments of being and that Milton's epic as such names not just the monster
but Frankenstein and Walton as well.

[7]Edward E. Sampson, "The Deconstruction of the Self," in *Texts of Identity,* ed.
John Shotter and Kenneth J. Gergen (London: Sage Publications, 1989), p. 3.

[8]John Milton, *Paradise Lost,* in *Complete Poems and Major Prose,* ed. Merritt Y.
Hughes (Indianapolis: Odyssey Press, 1957), Bk. V, ll. 527–28. Subsequent refer-
ences are cited in the text.

[9]*The Autonomy of the Self from Richardson to Huysmans* (Princeton: Princeton Univ.
Press, 1982), p. 33.

of writers, especially the Romantics, it is Lucifer who best
represents the drive for autonomy within the social and cos-
mic orders. Thus, not only did Milton help to inaugurate a
particular literary and cultural notion of autonomy, but he
also encompassed that notion in a limited taxonomy of possi-
ble selves. He engendered a cultural system of signs by which
those who attempt to achieve autonomous selfhood inevita-
bly come to name themselves "Lucifer," and to believe that
identity has been freely chosen. As an intertext *Paradise Lost*
functions in the novel exactly as it did in nineteenth-century
culture: as a literary repository of restrictive patterns of self-
identification, so deified by tradition as to have become, as
the monster claims, a "true history" of what we are. Milton
bequeathed to the world a text on which were inscribed the
cultural commandments of being, and Mary Shelley set out
to break those stone tablets and to expose the illusory nature
of bourgeois individualism. *Frankenstein* is, then, about au-
thorship, about creating a space in nineteenth-century cul-
ture to frame a different answer to the question "What was
I?" and to add another voice to the discourse of identity. But
such a clearing of cultural space required, if not a clear-
cutting, at least an undermining of the persuasiveness of *Para-
dise Lost* and Milton's monstrous myth.

   Such a deconstruction or undercutting of *Paradise Lost*
was aptly suited to Gothic fiction, and *Frankenstein* takes part
in the Romantic desecration of Milton. The impulse behind
the Gothic is an impulse toward formal innovation or insur-
gency. In its challenge to the structural and ideological con-
straints of the realistic novel, Gothic fiction "emerges as the
form that can answer the ontological and epistemological, as
well as the structural, demands of the Gothicists."[10] In its
investigation of what constitutes being, the Gothic novel is
best suited to the exploration of ontological crisis and onto-
logical insecurity. Although the monster makes claims for his
own autonomy, he finds himself so different from the rest of
the world that his identity is always in question. In Mary
Shelley's critique of Milton's epic, such ontological insecurity

   [10]George E. Haggerty, *Gothic Fiction / Gothic Form* (University Park: Pennsylvania
State Univ. Press, 1989), p. 14.

is marked by the conflict of identities the monster contem-
plates in answer to his question "Who was I?" As Chris
Baldick notes, "When Victor and his monster refer them-
selves back to *Paradise Lost*—a guiding text with apparently
fixed moral roles—they can no longer be sure whether they
correspond to Adam, to God, or to Satan, or to some or all of
these figures" (p. 44). *Paradise Lost,* Shelley suggests, splits
man up verbally, a cultural fragmentation that cannot be
healed as long as such terms as "Adam" and "Satan" hold
exclusive claim to denote identity; and Milton's myth, there-
fore, engenders a type of cultural schizophrenia, a disruption
of the self's relation with the world and with itself.

The thematic focus of Gothic fiction, therefore, is the
nature of identity; and in *Frankenstein* that focus is extended
to include the cultural and literary codes that shape and con-
tain that identity. In its subversion of the claims of verisimili-
tude, or in its substitution of one type of verisimilitude (sub-
jective) for another (objective), the Gothic novel becomes
both a way to demonstrate how subjective self-representation
is infiltrated, and indeed controlled, by larger and more pow-
erful culturally determined "objective" ideas of personality
and, at the same time, a way to critique or indeed subvert
hegemonic notions of identity and the hegemonic as a "sense
of reality" (Williams, p. 110). Realism and the realistic novel
are "slavishly chained to the status quo,"[11] and the hegemonic
thrives in a realistic literature in which the form of the text
and its accompanying ideology—its system of meanings and
values—are said to mirror the "natural" and, hence, appro-
priate condition of humans. The subjective or fantastic ele-
ment in Gothic fiction, however, subverts the primacy of a
realistic reading and calls into question the ideology of the
real and the hegemonic status quo. As George E. Haggerty
suggests, the key to the subjectivity in Gothic fiction

> lies in its ability to confuse our sense of what is "real." Such confu-
> sion is at the heart of the tale form: In the tale's momentary
> suspension from the world of the novel, we are left without the

[11]Claudio Guillén, *Literature as System: Essays Toward the Theory of Literary History*
(Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), p. 65.

reassurance of what we think of as "natural" limits. The ontologi-
cal basis of the experience of fiction has shifted, and "realism" has
given way to "fantasy" as a way of interpreting experience itself.
(p. 32)

Gothic fiction often parodies the truth claims of realistic nar-
rative and, therefore, challenges its embedded system of
meanings and values. Seen in this way, *Frankenstein* becomes
an example of the counter-hegemonic, an ideological act that
seeks to undermine the potency of the master narrative—
here, *Paradise Lost*.[12] Mary Shelley's novel is a fable of false
identity, of the residual concepts and ideas derived from Mil-
ton that exist in nineteenth-century culture and that delin-
eate and prescribe the boundaries of self. Having a self, the
novel suggests, depends upon being defined as an object in a
world that is already given over to a cultural system of signs,
preeminently language, and hence the "self" the monster
"has" is only the one posited by the language of that cultural
system. By having her monster give primacy to *Paradise Lost*
in what is admittedly his own limited literary hierarchy, Shel-
ley recognizes that Milton's text occupies a central place in
such a cultural system.

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As a series of "enveloped" first-person
narratives, *Frankenstein* continually reveals the cultural and
linguistic formation of identity, especially as it applies to *Para-
dise Lost*. The monster's autobiographical fragment—the
heart of Mary Shelley's investigation of Milton's monstrous
myth—is circumscribed by the narratives of Victor Franken-
stein and Robert Walton. Shelley's use of the autobiographi-
cal form in her novel is central to her investigation of the
pernicious influence of Milton's ontology because such self-
representation is apt to show most clearly the ways in which
the hegemonic prescribes the boundaries of self. The mon-

    [12]The term "master narrative" is borrowed from Fredric Jameson's *The Political
Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), p.
28.

ster's text, which announces his self-identification with Mil-
ton's Satan, is surrounded by other texts that suggest that the
tropes allowing such self-identification exist prior to and inde-
pendent of his own "birth" or fall into language. The mon-
ster and his text, or the monster as text, are engendered in a
world in which the process of naming relies upon a culturally
predetermined system of signs: Adam and Lucifer, the only
two constructs for the fallen male in Milton's cosmology. The
ontological choices in *Paradise Lost* control not only the mon-
ster's self-naming but the self-characterizations of Victor and
Walton as well.

Walton's declaration at the outset of his narrative, "I
shall commit my thoughts to paper" (p. 19), suggests the
essential linguistic nature of self in *Frankenstein,* an idea that
is repeated and reinforced in Victor's and the monster's ensu-
ing narratives. Early on in his epistolary exchange with his
sister, Walton tropes himself as a rebellious angel, acting
against his father's injunction not "to embark in a seafaring
life" (p. 17), and his expedition to the Arctic clearly recalls
the fallen angels' exploration of the "dismal world" of Hell in
Book II of *Paradise Lost:*

> Far off from these a slow and silent stream,
> *Lethe* the River of Oblivion rolls
> Her wat'ry Labyrinth, whereof who drinks,
> Forthwith his former state and being forgets,
> Forgets both joy and grief, pleasure and pain.
> Beyond this flood a frozen Continent
> Lies dark and wild, beat with perpetual storms
> Of Whirlwind and dire Hail, which on firm land
> Thaws not, but gathers heap, and ruin seems
> Of ancient pile; all else deep snow and ice.
>
> (ll. 582–91)

The Miltonic subtext of Walton's voyage suggests that his
journey to the "frozen continent" is an attempt to pass both
through and beyond Lethe: to forget "his former state and
being" and to inscribe a new and more heroic version of
himself—to rename himself "God" or "Adam." It may also
imply the self's desire to escape or elude the social determina-
tion of identity in a quest for autonomy. Ironically, however,

as his letters testify, Walton voyages on a sea of words, and his identity is already indelibly etched; the boundaries of self ordained by the master narrative are inescapable. Thus, Walton leaves England as a rebellious angel and returns as such, chastened but not saved, not an Adam but only another Lucifer of diminished stature. Walton's journey of forgetfulness, his attempted voyage beyond the culturally prescribed boundaries of self, is later reenacted in the monster's attempt to overcome his physical deformity by learning the art of language, and, like Walton's, the monster's attempt is a failure.

Victor's autobiography, which follows Walton's narrative and envelops the monster's, betrays a similar imprisonment in the ontology of *Paradise Lost*. His scientific research, like Walton's exploration, is described as a revolt against the father, specifically against his father's claim that the writing of Cornelius Agrippa is "sad trash" (p. 39). It is important to note that Victor's subsequent creation of the monster and the birth of the "monstrous" is precipitated by books, by language itself. Like the being he creates, he "falls" into language, into the "treasures" of Agrippa, Paracelsus, and Albertus Magnus: "But here were books, and here were men who had penetrated deeper and knew more. I took their word for all that they averred, and I became their disciple" (p. 40). The lure of such texts is their apparent mastery of the world, and in them Victor finds his "fervent longing to penetrate the secrets of nature" defined (p. 39), and, thus, through them he begins to shape both his sense of self and his destiny. Such a total acceptance of the truth claims of such texts foreshadows the monster's unquestioning assent to the ontological claims of *Paradise Lost* and suggests the insidious power of hegemonic forms that can perpetuate their own claims to "speak" the truth. The self that begins to evolve in Victor's autobiography is conspicuously un-Adamic, and Victor rejects the role of the natural philosopher who, like Adam, "might dissect, anatomise, and *give names*" (p. 40, emphasis added) but never acquire the sublime knowledge of God. Victor's creation of the monster is an attempt to create man in *his* own image, and the monster's hideousness implies the distortion of self that his fall into language entails:

> Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips.
>
> (p. 57)

Victor creates not Adam but an unnamed horror, "a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived" (p. 58), but that Milton had. Satan first appears in *Paradise Lost* without a name and possessed of a questionable identity. In Book I, Milton, wondering what caused Adam and Eve's fall, questions "Who first seduc'd them to that foul revolt?" and answers, "Th' infernal Serpent; hee it was" (ll. 33–34). Satan, though described by analogy to the serpent, is not actually called Satan by Milton until later in *Paradise Lost*, just as Victor withholds his direct naming of his creation until later in his narrative when he relates the events that take place on Mont Saleve: "A flash of lightning illuminated the *object*, and discovered its shape plainly to me; its gigantic stature, and the deformity of its aspect, more hideous than belongs to humanity, instantly informed me that it was the wretch, the filthy *dæmon*, to whom I had given life" (p. 76, emphasis added). The monster, first an "object," is named as "demon" and then later as "Devil" (p. 99); he is signified. But when Victor begins to name and designate the monster's identity he imposes selective cultural categories that exist prior to that naming and to the action of the novel and that reflect the self-namings in Walton's letters and Victor's own claim that he "bore a hell within [him], which nothing could extinguish" (p. 88). Victor's naming of his creation as "Devil" immediately precedes the monster's own autobiographical fragment, thus reinforcing the notion that the monster's autobiography, his self-signifying, is immured in Victor's naming of him. Figuratively, the monster's narrative is Victor's narrative—a "creature" engendered by a shared system of signs—and by analogy Walton's as well. The monster's fall into language both reenacts and glosses Victor's and Walton's descent into a limited cultural ontology. The monster's reply to Victor's "Devil" indicates that Victor's naming

only confirms an identity the monster himself has accepted as his own: "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" (p. 100).

The monster repeatedly entreats Victor to "listen to my tale" and to "listen to me," once again confirming the notion of self as text in *Frankenstein* and revealing the monster's mistaken belief that his language is empowering, that it will convince Victor of the justice of his position and his demands. Having mastered the "godlike science" of language, the monster is betrayed into the belief that he is the master of his history and of his world, that he can shape and control the self he would become. That the monster conceives of language as a "godlike science" clearly recalls Victor's experiments with human creation, and for the first time in the novel Mary Shelley links language to the creation of the monstrous itself. Both Victor and the monster seek mastery over origins and the fullness of presence. Language tantalizingly presents itself as an escape from the boundaries of self, a transcendental medium with which to master the monstrous, the finite limitations of life and identity. But, ironically, language *is* the monstrous, a limiting and limited taxonomy, a preestablished cultural hierarchy that defines all the possible definitions of self—here, Adam or Lucifer. Language as the monstrous insures what Foucault calls the "emergence of difference"[13]—"I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel"—and as such continues to promote ontological uncertainty, a verbal self-fragmentation that cannot be "healed" until the taxonomic field is expanded. What the monster's narrative reveals is not that one can master self through language but that self is mastered by language and the hegemonic forms encased within it.

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The monster's autobiography is the history of his fall into language and into the meanings and

[13]*The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 156.

values encoded in Milton's mythology. It is the tale of how *Paradise Lost* almost exclusively comes to define the monster's sense of who he is and of what constitutes his "being." Even though his history begins at what he calls the "original era of my being," it is marked by insistent moments of self-definition in the Miltonic mode and by an insistent movement toward the word "Satan" as the best suited to his configuration of self. The shepherd's hut he describes early on in his narrative is "as exquisite and divine a retreat as Pandæmonium appeared to the dæmons of hell after their sufferings in the lake of fire," and his hovel adjoining the DeLacey's cabin appears a "paradise" (pp. 106–7). If language is the cultural system into which the Monster as individual subject is inserted,[14] then that system, as Walton's and Victor's narratives have previously attested, is already dominated by a master text: *Paradise Lost;* and what seems conspicuously absent from the monster's self-representation are those allusions that might suggest the influence of the other texts from which he cons the "godlike science" of language. Goethe's *Sorrows of Werter,* for example, might have provided an oppositional voice to *Paradise Lost,* a different cultural source for identity formation, but that voice, the novel suggests, has been stifled and silenced by Milton.[15]

When the monster begins life his mind is a blank, like the empty page or the uninscribed text—"No distinct ideas occupied my mind; all was confused" (p. 103)—and he struggles to articulate even the simplest of his sense impressions: "Sometimes I wished to express my sensations in my own mode, but the uncouth and inarticulate sounds which broke from me frightened me into silence again" (p. 104). But the space of silence is a space without language, and hence antithetical to the formation of identity. The monster is held back from both self-expression and self-identification because he lacks language: "but at that time I knew nothing of the science of words or letters" (p. 109).

[14] See Peter Brooks, "Godlike Science / Unhallowed Arts: Language and Monstrosity in *Frankenstein,*" *New Literary History,* 9 (1978), 593.

[15] Jameson claims (p. 85) that such silencing is part of the very process of hegemonic culture.

The monster learns the "science of words or letters" from the DeLaceys, and it is then that he enters culture and begins erroneously to believe that language is a form of mastery and a way to overcome difference: "although I eagerly longed to discover myself to the cottagers, I ought not to make an attempt until I had first become master of their language; which knowledge might enable me to make them overlook the deformity of my figure" (pp. 113–14). In retrospect, the monster claims that he "did not yet entirely know the fatal effects of this miserable deformity" (p. 114), and hence he is encouraged "to apply with fresh ardour to the acquiring the art of language" (p. 115).

Hastening to narrate the "more moving part" of his story, the monster begins to relate those events that he claims "impressed me with feelings which, from what I had been, have made me what I am" (p. 116). Those events primarily center around his learning the art of language: "My days were spent in close attention, that I might more speedily master the language" (p. 118). He is first "instructed" by Volney's *The Ruin of Empires,* which appears merely to foreshadow the lessons of *Paradise Lost,* especially the history of mankind that the angel Michael relates to Adam in Books XI and XII: "so violence / Proceeded, and Oppression, and Sword-Law / Through all the Plain, and refuge none was found" (XI, ll. 671–73). Such instruction leads the monster to self-reflection: "The words induced me to turn towards myself," and to the question that lies at the heart of his narrative, "What was I?" (p. 120). The fall into language is a descent into introspection and the nature of identity; however, the question "What was I?" can only be answered by language itself. Identity can only be sought in culture and its masterworks, and so the monster turns to *Paradise Lost,* which, along with the *Sorrows of Werter* and Plutarch's *Lives,* is the "prize" he believes he has found one night in his rambles. Again his reading prompts insistent self-questioning about his origins and his identity: "Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them" (p. 128). The monster's "birth" into language and culture promotes the ontological insecurity *Frankenstein* sets out to ex-

plore. Because the monster cannot distinguish between levels
and types of discourse—for him all narratives are "histories,"
and therefore true—he reads Milton's text in the same light he
has interpreted the tales the DeLaceys and Saphie relate, as "a
true history" (p. 129). But for the monster, *Paradise Lost,* unlike
Volney's *Ruins,* is not simply a history of civilization but a
chronicle of self, in which he searches for the lineaments of his
own identity, in which he searches for a name:

> I often referred the several situations, as their similarity struck
> me, to my own. Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to
> any other being in existence; but his state was far different from
> mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of
> God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the
> especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with, and
> acquire knowledge from, beings of a superior nature: but I was
> wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as
> the fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when I
> viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose
> within me.   (p. 129)

What he finds in the character of Satan is what he feels is the
best name to fit the facts of his existence, and when he is
rejected by the DeLaceys he accepts that name as his own: "I,
like the arch-fiend, bore a hell within me; and, finding myself
unsympathised with, wished to tear up the trees, spread
havoc and destruction around me, and then to have sat down
and enjoyed the ruin" (p. 136).

   As Raymond Williams notes, "the true condition of hege-
mony is effective *self-identification* with the hegemonic forms:
a specific and internalized 'socialization' which is expected to
be positive but which, if that is not possible, will rest on a
(resigned) recognition of the inevitable and the necessary" (p.
118). This, in effect, is what has happened to the monster. In
accepting *Paradise Lost* as his own "true history"—a history
that is corroborated by his subsequent reading of Victor's
journal—he has begun a process of self-identification with
the possible ontological choices encoded in the master narra-
tive. At first he hopes for the name and identity of Adam and
the positive attributes that, in his mind, accompany such a
self; he hopes that he too can be "a perfect creature, happy

and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator."
But the monster must resign himself to the inevitable implica-
tions that the master narrative, as a hegemonic form that has
come to comprise his only sense of reality, prescribes: he is
not Adam but Satan, and, hence, he is forced to act out the
role of Satan: "from that moment I declared everlasting war
against the species, and, more than all, against him who had
formed me, and sent me forth to this insupportable misery"
(p. 136). Confronted by the ontological insecurity engen-
dered by the master narrative, the monster now becomes
absorbed in ways of preserving his identity and his supposed
autonomy. The monster's quest for revenge, then, becomes
the very means of maintaining his existence, an existence he
continues to cling to at novel's end: "Evil thenceforth became
my good. Urged thus far, I had no choice but to adapt my
nature to an element which I had willingly chosen. The com-
pletion of my demoniacal design became an insatiable pas-
sion. And now it is ended; there is my last victim!" (p. 220).

The movement within the monster's autobiography from
Milton's "true history" to his discovery of what he believes is
his "true" self suggests that, at novel's end, he comes to em-
body the hegemonic, which exists not in the abstract but in a
lived system of meaning and self-identification: he now *is* the
"monstrous." Though Victor Frankenstein, the monster's
"last victim," lies dead, William, Clerval, and Elizabeth have
also been victims of his necessary acts of self-preservation. As
alternative configurations of self, they threaten the ontologi-
cal security the monster achieves in his self-identification with
Milton's Satan. William, Clerval, and Elizabeth represent com-
peting claims to what defines the "natural," and, hence, their
continued existence threatens the monster with the discovery
of his own unnaturalness. Their murder at the hands of the
monster symbolically enacts the way in which the hegemonic
preserves itself through the destruction of alternative systems
of meaning and value; and, therefore, the linguistic process of
naming engendered by *Paradise Lost* becomes, as Mellor notes,
"a discourse of power that results in the domination of the
ideology of a ruling class and leads directly to the creation of
evil" (p. 134).

Such self-preservation of the hegemonic does not end with the death of Victor Frankenstein, however. As the monster admits, he "did not satisfy [his] own desires. They were for ever ardent and craving" (p. 221). As his earlier self-identification with Milton's Satan makes quite clear, the "demonical design" is not his own but society's, a hegemonic form engendered by *Paradise Lost;* nor is it ended—it has to be continually "renewed, recreated, defended, and modified" (Williams, p. 112). Although Victor is dead and the monster is about to resign himself to the silence and darkness of the Arctic night, Walton lives to return, to repeat and recapitulate in his life and letters the triumph of Milton's monstrous myth.

In *A Writer's Diary* Virginia Woolf remarks that in Milton "is summed up much of what *men* thought of *our* place in the universe, of our duty to God, our religion" (emphasis added);[16] but in *A Room of One's Own* she claims that the woman writer must "look past Milton's bogey," for only then "she will be born."[17] Like Woolf, Mary Shelley recognized the immense power of the monolithic and monologic voice of *Paradise Lost* particularly as it pertained to the nineteenth-century discourse of identity; and she, too, attempted to "look beyond" the ontological boundaries prescribed by Milton's epic. But in order to engender a counter-mythology of self, she had to discover "new forms or adaptations of form" (Williams, p. 126), and Shelley found them in the Gothic. Concerned as it is with questions of identity, ontological insecurity, and the cultural and psychological boundaries of self-representation, the Gothic novel became the emergent literary form best suited to explore and unmask the limited and limiting ontology of *Paradise Lost*.

Gothic fiction betrays an anxiety about such boundaries or limits—especially those that separate the individual self from something that is other[18]—not only the limits to self that confront the characters but those that confront the au-

[16]*A Writer's Diary,* ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953), p. 6.
[17]*A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929), pp. 198–99.
[18]See Eugenia C. DeLamotte, *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), p. 19.

thor as well. For Mary Shelley and her monster, *Paradise Lost*
and its system of naming presents just such an apparently
impenetrable boundary, which, in its ontological limitations,
cuts off the self from alternative namings such as "Elizabeth"
or "Clerval." But as Mary Poovey points out, the "representa-
tion of ideology (whether conscious or not) can sometimes
expose its implicit contradictions";[19] and while the monster
remains trapped in the cultural parameters of being engen-
dered by *Paradise Lost,* for the author a means of escape from
such limits may be found in the Gothic form itself, in which
its two contradictory patterns, realism and fantasy, overlap
but do not join. As stated earlier, the subjective or fantastic
element in Gothic fiction subverts the primacy of a realistic
reading and calls into question the ideology of the real and of
the hegemonic status. In her conscious representation of Mil-
ton's myth of identity and its disastrous consequences, Mary
Shelley points out the contradictions inherent in the bour-
geois ideal of the individual. Explicit in the narratives of
Walton, Victor, and the monster is Shelley's recognition that
subjective self-representation is infiltrated and controlled by
culturally predetermined ideas of personality; and yet, the
notion of self inaugurated by Milton's myth insists on the
relative autonomy of the individual, who is "by nature free."
In fact her novel suggests that the very moment the self
claims its greatest autonomy may be the moment that is most
marked by the cultural predeterminants of identity. As *Fran-
kenstein* makes clear, our nature is never "willingly chosen";
self is always a social construct. Such an intuition on Mary
Shelley's part paves the way for other culturally determined
notions of male and female identity, for alternative dis-
courses of self based not on the ideal of autonomy but, per-
haps, on those of community and companionship. As Euge-
nia DeLamotte points out, the boundaries of the self was a
crucial issue for nineteenth-century women, and the female
Gothic dramatizes the awareness that women have to "strug-
gle for self-realization in an artificially enclosed world" (p.

[19]*The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary
Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984),
p. xv.

27). In *Frankenstein* the Miltonic subtext stands as a linguistic mausoleum, and the novel deals with woman's and man's (author's and character's) immurement in such an ideologically confining space. By novel's end, however, Mary Shelley may be suggesting that we can escape the artificial enclosure of self by expanding our idea of what the self means, if only to include the final vision of *Paradise Lost,* where Adam and Eve, "*hand in hand* with wand'ring steps and slow, / Through *Eden* took thir solitary way" (XII, ll. 648–49; emphasis added).

Yet, while *Frankenstein* clearly dramatizes the self's immurement in the restrictive ideology of *Paradise Lost,* the relationship of Mary Shelley's novel to Milton's epic remains problematic. Since all literature retains cultural ideology, and this is especially the case with a work like *Paradise Lost,* while Shelley may reject Milton's prescriptive and prohibitive ontology, she cannot avoid the ideological detritus that her own deconstruction of Milton's monstrous myth precipitates. There is always fallout when we explode inherited systems of meaning, and as criticism of the novel—past and present—evinces, Milton's work retains its powerful hold on Mary Shelley's imagination as well as our own.[20] Yet while she could not silence Milton's voice, in her critique of his role in the cultural formation of self Shelley did succeed in changing the discourse of identity from monologue to dialogue. She began to reconstruct and restore the voices against which Milton's masterwork was opposed, voices "for the most part stifled and reduced to silence" (Jameson, p. 85). In *Frankenstein* Mary Shelley looked beyond "Milton's bogey" in search of another "true history" of what we are.

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[20]Martin Tropp, in *Mary Shelley's Monster: The Story of Frankenstein* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), for example, perpetuates the reading of *Frankenstein* as a Romantic version of *Paradise Lost;* and even Gilbert and Gubar claim, finally, that "by parodying *Paradise Lost* in what may have begun as a secret, barely conscious attempt to subvert Milton, Shelley ended up telling, too, the central story of *Paradise Lost*" (p. 221).